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MUSTANG MERLE'S MERCILESS FOE.

BY MAJOR SAM S. SCOTT.



THE CHEEK SO WHITE BEFORE HAD RECEIVED THE ACCURSED MARK

Mustang Merle's Merciless Foe:

OR,

THE ACCURSED BRAND.

A Romance of the Raided Ranch.

BY MAJOR SAM S. SCOTT,

('THE OLD MAJOR,')

AUTHOR OF "MUSTANG MERLE," "MUSTANG MERLE'S MINE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GOLD SEEKER.

It was a wild, weird place for a night camp, but those who occupied it did so from dire necessity.

The gorge had once been the bed of a rushing torrent, for there were marks of waters on the rocks on either side, showing where the flood had coursed through the dark opening on its way to the Tagus.

Under a projecting rock which was large enough to shelter a dozen wagons like it, was a dilapidated vehicle which had been drawn by two nearly exhausted horses that stood near by, cropping the short, dead grass which had perished for want of sustenance.

Night had fallen over this scene, and the canopy of heaven, thickly sown with stars, tempted the man who leaned against one wheel and looked up, with a desperate longing in his eyes.

By and by a step came down the gulch, and turning his head, the man caught sight of a girlish figure, which soon stopped in front of him.

There was a resemblance between the two. It was enough to tell any one that they were father and child; but he had the haggard look of a half-starved man, while in her eyes was still a freshness which did not suit the time or place.

"Did you see anything, child?" asked the man.

"Nothing. I went to the high ground and looked in every direction, but nothing rewarded me."

"It is no use. We have to perish in this country."

"To-morrow, perhaps—"

"There may be no to-morrow for us!" broke in the parent. "Coral, the vultures of the border are on our track, and we will become their victims before another morning dawns."

The daughter—she could not have been more than seventeen, with a graceful figure, rounded and nearly perfect in contour—came up to him and placed one arm around his waist.

"We will fare better to-morrow," she encouraged. "This ravine is a good hiding-place, and here we will recruit our strength."

"A good hiding-place from such fiends? No; we can't escape them, though we may hide here for a brief spell. Look around you, Coral! They will come into the gulch and have us at their mercy. You recollect the letter which was so mysteriously placed in my hands before we drove out of Santa Leo?"

"Yes, father."

"I was inclined to laugh at it, you know. I thought it a device to keep us out of the land of god but it was not intended for that."

"But 't was so oddly worded," smiled Coral.

"So it was, and that is what made me think it was a hoax. Here we are cooped up like chickens in a coop. Look at these walls, I say. See how they tower above us, and practically hem us in."

As he spoke the man waved his hand toward the walls of the gulch, and was about to continue, when his look became a stare, and a gasp of horror parted his lips.

Coral instantly saw the change.

"What is it, father, dear?" she cried. "In Heaven's name, what has happened?"

He made no reply, but stared at a particular spot, his eyes seeming to start from his head, and his whole frame in a tremble.

"Look!" he cried at last, pointing at the opposite wall. "In the name of our dead, look at the handwriting on the stone, Coral!"

The girl followed his outstretched finger and saw that which riveted her gaze from the beginning.

As we have said, the shades of night had fallen over the landscape, but there stood out on the wall a sentence which seemed to have been written in letters of fire.

"It is the work of the arch fiend," exclaimed the man, still staring at the writing. "See how

the letters stand out in living fire, Coral! We are in a land of demonism!"

All this time the girl was leaning forward, and with bated breath was reading the inscription on the stone.

Now, since she had looked a moment, the letters seemed traced in phosphorus, because they appeared to dance before her eyes and to assume a thousand fantastic shapes.

"Read it, Coral!" cried the man. "Read what it says, for I am afraid to trust my eyes."

"It is not hard to read, father. It says this:

"Travelers westward through this gorge leave all hope behind. Beyond lies forbidden ground—the land of death!"

Silence followed the voice that read the inscription on the wall of the gulch.

Darkness had brought out the letters invisible through the day, and had shown them to the twain under the wall with their scanty outfit.

"Shall we turn back?" asked the man at last.

"No!" was the quick response. "Let us go on in spite of that warning! It is the work of men who want this country for their own schemes; it is the handwriting of those who are outlaws in sight of God and man."

"That may be, Coral. I am not afraid of them, but I am anxious concerning your welfare. Your mother, rest her soul, is dead, and we are alone in the world. The time came when we had to quit the home which was so happy so many years. We became wanderers in search of a home elsewhere—beyond this gulch, which is called the Land of Death. We know that we have enemies on our track—that the mysterious letter dropped into my hands at Santa Leo told us this. We are in the land of the saddle bandit, and for some cause I am hunted by some one. If I thought—"

He stopped and listened with his head turned to the East.

"There are voices down yonder. I heard them," said Coral. "We must be prepared for anything."

She stepped to the wagon, and, reaching in, gripped a revolver which she pulled out, moving, the next moment, toward the sound and stopping near the wall with a determined look upon her beautiful face.

Her father was not slow to follow the heroic example set by the girl.

He took from the wagon a Winchester which he cocked as he moved to her side, and the shadows of the pair blended on the rocky wall at their right. Not a sound was heard now. The crickets that had disturbed the seclusion of the ravine with their chirpings were still, and the silence of Death itself seemed to have taken entire possession of the place.

But this did not last long. The keen ears of father and daughter soon caught the sounds that came down the gulch, and at the same time their eyes spied the gliding figure which hugged the wall as it advanced.

All at once their rang out on the air the challenge of the man with the Winchester.

"Halt where you are! To take another step is to court death in your boots."

In an instant the person near the wall stopped short and remained so.

"I will see who he is, Coral," decided the father, advancing a step. "I will get a look at this night prowler, and if he is the person I expect, woe to his skin!"

Coral saw her father depart with visible reluctance; but she saw, too, that the man hugging the wall did not move nor lift a weapon.

"Come out from where you stand!" called out the gold-hunter, leveling his weapon. "If you don't I will let starlight into your brain!"

"Wal, I don't want to be bored in that manner. It might spoil the beauty of the last o' the Bundys, you see. I'll do anything almost before I'll have an ounce of lead thrown into my head, so hyer I am," and there stepped into fuller view a tall, angular figure, at sight of which a smile went over Coral's face—it was so comical in appearance.

A moment later her father came back, accompanied by this man, who, at sight of her, doffed his hat and made a low bow.

"Another bit o' beauty, an' purtier than they take it in photograph galleries. What might you call her?"

"This is my daughter, Coral," was the reply. Old Joe Bundy bowed again.

"I thought I heard voices awhile ago down the gulch," continued the man.

"You did. I left my pard back yonder to take a look through the ravine, and to see if anything had been added to the writing on the rock."

"You have seen it, then?"

"Yes. Did it scare you?" and Bundy's face broke into a smile. "It's been than some time."

"Who wrote it on the stone?"

"Captain Dick, I suppose."

"And who is Captain Dick?" asked Coral and her father in one breath.

"He's the dandy raider-outlaw of these parts—the Ishmael of the border. He used to be Captain Red Jacket's right bower, but they outlawed him and since the death of his old leader he has been carrying on on his own hook Handsome as a picture, fearing neither God nor man, he is the desperado of the Southwest and we have trouble with 'im every now and then. You don't want to stop in this place when in a few hours you can be in soft beds at Mesquite."

The man seemed to start at the name.

"Hitch up and come with us," continued Joe. "You're not safe hyer; and, besides, I want Coral to see the best ranch out o' doors. I'll call my pard up while you throw the horses ag'in the tongue," and he stepped aside and sounded a low whistle.

The stranger at once went back to the horses and began to hitch up. He was engaged at this task when he heard a slight cry from his daughter and turning, saw her staring at a young Indian whom Joe Bundy was introducing.

"This is Red Hawk, the Apache, the boss rider, trailer and ha'rifter o' the border, explained Joe. "It don't pay ter smooth his fur the wrong way."

CHAPTER II.

THE BRAND OF THE UNKNOWN.

TWO hours later the wagon carrying Coral Lemon and her father passed up the tree-bordered avenue in front of the buildings that went to make up Mesquite Ranch, and in a short time the pair found themselves comfortably seated in a room well lighted, and in the presence of a young person who had announced himself as Mustang Merle, the proprietor.

"I am glad Joe and Red Hawk found you," said Merle. "You were not safe where you were. The country just now is the abode of half a dozen bands of villains who are levying tribute on the rich ranches and stampeding cattle. Some of these bands are guilty of crimes far worse than stealing. They are determined to prevent immigration to the district which seems to have been your destination, and to do this will stoop to anything—any crime."

Coral's father drew from his pocket a crumpled letter which he handed to Mustang Merle, saying that it had been placed in his hands at Santa Leo, a town further east.

"I see. It is a warning, and it warns you against entering the land. It seems to have been written in the interests of these very scoundrels, chief of whom is one Dolores Dick, an old acquaintance of mine—and for whom I don't entertain the friendliest of feelings. But, I see by this letter that you seem to be an object of special hatred. Do you know why?"

Lemon shook his head.

"It would seem that I have incurred the hatred of the outlaws in some manner; but the present is my first appearance in this country."

"What has been your profession?"

Father and daughter looked at one another and smiled.

"A few years ago I was a Government detective, and, as such, was brought in contact with criminals of all classes, mail-robbers and counterfeiters. I resigned some time ago to embark in other business, which proved a failure, and Coral and I, after many reverses, were about to begin life over in the Tagus country, which promises so much to the industrious."

"Look at this, Joe," said Mustang Merle, passing the mysterious letter to Joe Bundy.

The old fellow took the missive and scanned it with his intensely black eyes.

"Wait!" he cried, rising suddenly and rushing from the room.

When he came back he held in his hands another piece of paper which he held alongside the letter, a comical expression on his countenance and victory in his eye.

"This is your letter and this one we got some months ago from the chief bandit of the region," he said, looking at Lemon, whose curiosity was now aroused. "Don't you detect a similarity between the two? You say you used to be a detective for Uncle Sam and you must have been brought in contact with the handwriting of criminals. Now, how do these two letters strike you?"

Already there was on Lemon's face a look of amazement.

"They were written by the same man!" he decided.

"Thar's no doubt of that. Why, Red Hawk would say so. Yes, Dolores Dick, the handsome outlaw, wrote the letter placed in your hands at Santa Leo and the one we got some time ago."

At this moment the door opened and the lithe figure of the young Apache stole into the room.

Immediately Old Joe relinquished the two letters and went over to the Indian and the pair went out.

"That Indian has been worth his weight in gold to me," said Mustang turning to his visitors. "He comes down from the North whenever he thinks anything threatens us. He dropped in day before yesterday and you may be sure we were glad to see him. Of late we have discovered some very strange work by our old enemies, the bandits of the border. Our cattle have been branded with certain chemicals which leave a mark as indelible as the branding iron. That this is the work of Captain Dick there is no doubt, but we have been unable to catch the scoundrel. The work is done at night and the brander has thus far escaped our vigilance. Now that you know who your enemy is, you will not leave us until we have settled with him, for I am getting ready to carry the war into Africa, as it were. I intend to settle this feud once for all."

The young owner of Mesquite arose and stood before his guests.

"I had to fight Captain Red Jacket and his band; I was compelled to defend my mine against Rubio and Dolores Dick. I had to fight for life and liberty against these vultures of the border for I have been their marked prey ever since the ranch passed into my hands. Now, the time for final settlement has come. We are going to have a grand round-up. If I lose, well and good; if I win, the reign of brigandage in this part of God's country ends forever."

There was a bright flash in the eyes of the boy rancher and the face of Coral Lemon glowed with admiration.

"I am at your service," spoke Lemon. "I will assist you in the crusade against these rascals."

"No, I cannot ask you to take part in this feud. You have a child to look after. Mesquite is not helpless. I have at my command twenty of as good men as ever cocked a Winchester or threw a lasso. I have the advice of Old Joe Bundy, homely, but brave and clever, and the strong arm and keen eye of the best Indian in the great Apache nation. I am not helpless against the foe, no, no!"

Lemon would have repeated his offer if a hurried footstep had not sounded on the veranda just beyond the door, and the next moment the lank figure of Bundy appeared with a most comical expression.

"It beats the Jews," said he. "That brander must have the constitution of a spook."

"What, has he escaped us again?" cried Mustang Merle.

"Yes. He's just marked another steer."

The young rancher turned to Lemon.

"I want you to see the work of this scoundrel," he said. "We will go down to the corral."

The occupants of the house, with the exception of Coral, were soon walking rapidly toward the corral where they saw a number of moving lights and after awhile a number of rough-looking men.

There were loud voices and any number of execrations.

In a moment two herders led toward Mustang Merle a large white steer which appeared frightened.

"Thar is the infernal brand!" cried Joe Bundy, pointing to the animal's hind quarters. "It has been placed there within an hour, an' is the mark of the mysterious brander."

All moved closer, Lemon with more curiosity than any, to scrutinize a mark which looked for all the world like that left by the branding iron.

It was in the form of a triangle, in the center of which was a large "D".

"He comes and goes like a weasel," explained Merle. "I don't censure my men, for they exercise the greatest caution, and Red Hawk has tried to ferret out the villain. Nearly every night we have had one or more cattle branded as you see this one is. The mark is indelible—more so than that by the iron. It is enough to imbue one with desire to check this work at all hazards—don't you think so?"

Lemon turned toward Mustang Merle and looked at him a moment before he spoke.

"Do you call that Dolores Dick's work?" he asked at last.

"Not his personal work perhaps," was the reply; "but I am confident that he ordered it done."

"I have seen that singular mark before."

"You?"

"Yes. You know that for some years I was connected with the Secret Service of the Government. Well, a mark just like that was the private mark of a band of counterfeiters which I broke up. But I did not get their leader."

The last words were spoken with a smile and the ex-detective looked once more at the mark on the steer.

The leader of the coniackers was a young fellow as sharp as a tack in rascality, but he disappeared so suddenly and mysteriously, just when I thought I had him, that I threw up my commission in disgust and became a private citizen."

The steer was led back, and after giving his herders orders to increase their vigilance and to shoot down any one seen near the corral, Mustang Merle and Lemon returned to the house.

Suddenly there rang out on the air the sharp and piercing shriek of a human being. The two men sprung toward the house, the door of which the boy rancher threw open hurriedly, to discover the prostrate form of Coral stretched at full length on the floor and apparently lifeless.

Lemon rushed forward, and with a cry of horror picked up his child and looked down into her white face.

Merle leaned forward, speechless, and watched the agony of the father while he kissed the lips of his darling, at the same time calling down upon the head of the fiend who had frightened her the vengeance of Heaven.

"She is not dead; but look at this!" cried Lemon. "She has been branded like your cattle and by the same infamous hand!"

Mustang Merle could not believe what he saw.

He could not believe that the brand which he had just seen on one of his steers—the triangle and the "D" had been put upon the beautiful skin of the ex-detective's daughter; but there it was!

The cheek, so white before, had received the accursed mark, and it looked ten times more horrible for its surroundings. There it was on the cheek of Coral Lemon, destroying her radiant beauty, and making her an object to be shunned by society, no matter where she might be!

The girl came slowly out of her trance. By this time Joe Bundy and Red Hawk had come in, and all had seen the disfiguring brand.

There had settled over the faces of the men a look of fierce determination and revenge, and the words spoken by Lemon were echoed by every one.

"The hand that did this shall pay for it!"

CHAPTER III.

A FATHER'S OATH.

CORAL LEMON, the child of the ex-detective, knew what had taken place. She was aware that she carried on her cheek the brand of the Unknown, and her eyes got a sudden flash when she looked in the mirror and viewed the accursed mark.

"Better my cheek than your heart!" she said, going over to her father and clasping his hands. "There is no telling what would have happened if the villain had found you here instead of myself. He stole upon me with the stealth of the assassin, and I found the mark on my face almost before I knew he was in the house."

"What was he like, child?" eagerly asked Lemon.

"In person he was tall and well-formed; but his face was covered by a black velvet mask, and I did not get to see it."

"What did he say?"

"But four words, and I shall never forget them. He laid his hand on my wrist, and the fingers seemed to sink to the bone, and looking into my eyes with triumph while he applied his brand, he said: 'This is getting even!' and at touch of the branding-iron, I fell to the floor where you found me."

The men looked at Lemon, and he turned toward the young rancher.

"What do you think now?" he asked.

"An old enemy," Mustang Merle returned.

There was no answer by the ex-detective, and shortly afterward, by the withdrawal of the ranchmen, the two were left alone.

"I am willing to wear the brand through life," spoke Coral with a smile. "I am confident that the object sought by the mysterious brander was my father's life. Not finding him here he turned his attention to me and marked me as you see."

"It shall be avenged," declared Mustang Merle, solemnly.

"Let it not be done at the risk of a noble

life," was the quick response. "I am willing to suffer. We left the old home with some bitter memories behind us, not thinking we were to encounter such scenes in this country. But I am not afraid to dare the future, though I would not for a moment imperil the life I love on the trail of vengeance."

Merle and his guest watched Coral quit the room for the chamber which had been assigned her, and when the door had closed the father laid his hand on the boy rancher's arm.

"I am confident that an old enemy is on my track—that the letter thrust upon me in Santa Leo came from him. I made many an enemy while serving the Government; a detective always does this. Several times I have narrowly escaped assassination. At one time I was dogged for months by the counterfeiting gang whose leader I failed to catch, and, as I have said, it was that failure which drove me from the service. I have kept many of these events from my child; but it seems to me that we have one and the same foe, for the brand that marks your steers disfigures my daughter."

"It is true; but, tell me something about this man who slipped through your hands."

Lemon proceeded and for some time his voice was the only one heard in the room.

He detailed to Mustang Merle the circumstances of the past which connected him with his work for the Government and described the man whose escape had changed his whole life, finally driving him to the necessity of seeking a new home in the country of the Rio Tagus, infested, though he knew it not, by bands of brigands whose deeds had rendered it undesirable as a place of residence for years.

At the conclusion of his narrative Lemon drew from his pocket a well-worn photograph which he placed in Mustang Merle's hands.

"I have never shown this to Coral," said he. "It is the photograph of the man known to me as Richard Nellis, the chief of the counterfeiters of New Orleans—the man who avoided me and disappeared so strangely, as I have told you."

The young rancher took the card, and, for some time, looked at the picture without speaking.

"You don't care if I call Jerome?" he asked at length.

"Certainly not."

"You have not seen Jerome yet," Merle added, with a smile. "He is one of the curiosities of Mesquite," and he crossed the room and jerked a green cord which hung along the wall.

In a moment footsteps were heard on the stair, and the door opened to admit a person, the sight of whom drew a cry from Lemon's lips.

"Jerome" came into the room on all fours like a cat, but it was very clear that he was human.

He had a strange face, warped and dark, but two sparkling eyes shone in his head, and when he saw Mustang Merle with another person he appeared to hesitate.

"Come, boy; I have something to show you," said Merle, and, with a laugh, the deformed creature pulled himself into a chair near his master.

"Look at this," continued Merle. "It is the face of some one whom you may have seen in your dreams."

The long fingers of the hand seized the photograph and it was held close to the face of the cripple.

"'T is he!" cried Jerome, looking up and then laughing once more. "Did the gentleman wonder bring it?"

"Whose face is it, Jerome?" asked Merle.

"Why, the face of the horseman I saw last summer when I was down in the gulch writing my name on the rocks. You haven't forgotten that master?"

"I remember your story; but, make no mistake, Jerome. We want to know whose picture that is."

"'Tis his, I tell you!" persisted the boy, for he was not more, though disease had given him an oldish look and even white hairs among the dark locks that covered his head in profusion.

Mustang Merle looked at Lemon.

"We have always believed that the horseman seen by Jerome last summer was the redoubtable Dolores Dick, on one of the periodical spying trips which he makes just before a raid."

"It was Dick!" cried Jerome.

"Then—"

Lemon stopped and thought.

"Do you know that all this seems a dream to me?" he went on. "I cannot think that the man who seems to be on my track at this time is the old enemy of Mesquite."

"Some men have strange lives."

"I know that. To-day they are one person,

to-morrow another. That is true, and the man who has this truth impressed upon his mind most is the detective."

Lemon now turned to Jerome who had fallen asleep.

"That is one of his habits," said Merle, nodding toward his visitor. "Jerome was thrown into a fire in his childhood by an Indian and that is why he is so terribly misshapen. But he has a mind as bright as a dollar and is as faithful to me as a slave. He goes all over the country, sometimes on all fours, as you saw him come into the room, and again on my horses. There is no one like him. Sometimes he has singular dreams which are little short of revelations. He is a marvelous boy."

The last sentence was hardly finished when Jerome suddenly aroused himself and tumbled from the chair.

Looking up and seeing that neither Merle nor his guest was smiling at the mishap, he scrambled in his strange way from the room and went back to bed.

"So I have found Richard Nellis again?" mused Lemon, taking the photograph in his hand and studying it in silence. "So I have rediscovered the man who forced me to retire from the service in disgrace! Well, time cuts queer capers. But my child, marked for life! My God! That is what he calls 'getting even' with me for breaking up his band. Marked for life by my bitter foe!"

Lemon sprung up and the next moment was walking up and down the room in front of Mustang Merle who watched him with an intensity that was not unmixed with pity.

All at once Lemon stopped and stood before the young rancher.

"A part of this battle with the enemy of Mesquite is mine!" he exclaimed. "I swear before the Most High that I will punish this brander of my dear child! I swear that I will stand face to face with Richard Nellis *alias* Dolores Dick, and that I will pay him back with interest for the mark on the cheek of my Coral! It was the last cheek kissed by her sainted mother ere she died, and I will see that the hand that has defiled it does not escape me."

The uplifted hand fell to the speaker's side and while his lips still quivered with the last words a sound that startled both rung through the house.

"The challenge stands accepted!" said the voice.

In an instant both Mustang Merle and the detective had bounded across the room and the two were on the veranda in a flash, revolvers drawn, but they saw nothing.

"It could not have been a deception," said Lemon, looking into the young rancher's face. "It was a human voice."

There was no answer, for Mustang Merle was waiting for the man advancing toward the house to come up.

It was Old Joe Bundy.

"Did you see him?" demanded Lemon, springing forward and seizing the lank Yankee's arm.

"Did I see who?" queried Joe. "You look like you've just seen the Old Harry. The only thing out o' the way I've seen since the double branding is the scare in your own face."

The startling events were related to Old Joe by Merle, at which the old fellow gave a prolonged whistle of astonishment and grinned:

"Ghosts!" said he. "I've always noticed that they come whenever Jerome put his fingers into the pie!"

And, to Lemon's surprise, Old Joe deliberately walked away, leaving Merle to say that he was a "queer stick," but worth his weight in gold in case of an emergency.

CHAPTER IV.

A SPY IN RED.

MEANTIME the Indian known as Red Hawk was at work on a trail which had escaped the eye of the keenest herder.

No sooner had he seen the branded steer than he slipped off, and passing the corral, went on and on until he reached a small creek which ran through the ranch.

Red Hawk had the eyes of a night-bird, for he looked at the soil, stooping now and then and eying every vestige of grass in hopes of finding the track of the Mysterious Brander.

The Indian at length stood beyond the boundaries of the creek and in the shadow of a tree which grew alone beneath the glowing stars.

All at once the red-skin caught one of the drooping limbs and drew his agile body up among the branches. He crouched in the ample fork like a panther and remained perfectly still.

The flitting minutes saw no change in the Indian's position, and the suspicious wolf that

peaked under the tree with his nose elevated to catch the first scent of danger, did not suspect that one of the enemies of his tribe was near.

It was an hour before the watcher in the tree saw or heard anything that seemed to reward his vigil.

At the end of this time his sharp ears caught the sound of approaching hoofs, and slowly from out the starlit night came a horse which neared the tree.

Red Hawk did not lean forward with curiosity lurking in his eye, but remained as motionless as ever and bided his time.

The animal stopped a short distance from the tree and remained there like a statue.

The person on the steed was looking back toward Mesquite. He was well-built, as the Indian could see, but his face the stars would not reveal.

Red Hawk looked at him until he moved forward once more and drew rein nearer than before and waited for some one.

"I don't believe he's going to keep his appointment," said a voice which the Indian did not lose. "I won't come again if he fails this time."

Presently the rider of the motionless steed seemed to hear or see that which rewarded his watch, for he seized the reins which had fallen on the horse's neck and looked toward the ranch.

"Pshaw! it was nothing; he is playing me false," he muttered. "I won't go on as I promised. If he don't think enough of his word to meet me here, I can go back. Besides, this is dangerous business, the way things are going on the ranch, and I don't like the thought of risking my precious neck in this work."

The next moment he turned back and a smile overspread the dark face of the tenant of the tree when he saw the horse on the move.

Red Hawk watched the man out of sight and it was some time before he ventured to quit his post. When he did so it was with the greatest care, and in a little while he was swinging back toward Mesquite as before; but with a strange gleam in his eye.

He went toward the stables and saw a man emerge from the lower one which was used by the ranch rider, Texas Kit.

It was not long before Texas Kit had a shadow at his heels and as he slouched toward the house, whistling as was his wont, the eye of the fox of the Apaches was upon him.

There was something cat-like in the very nature of the man so silently followed by Red Hawk. He could walk without being heard and Mustang Merle had often compared him to a catamount, while Old Joe was wont to say that he reminded him of death, inasmuch as he came when no one looked for him, and that his going was as stealthy as his coming on.

Bred to the life of a ranch rider, Texas Kit knew his calling in every particular. He was not past twenty-three, but had seen more than the majority of men of forty and could spin tales of the border startling enough to excite the deep curiosity of older men.

Red Hawk had no doubt that the man he had seen on the open and near the tree was this very Texas Kit. He had never let his eyes deceive him and was not the spy to see but one part of a game.

Texas Kit reached the main house and there turned to the right to seek his own quarters nearby. He did not seem to care for the group of men who were discussing the last branding, for he passed them by and entered the shanty which he inhabited alone.

The interior of the shanty was dark enough.

Texas Kit closed the door behind him, and as it was not his night on duty, he threw himself upon the cot in one corner and in a few moments began to snore.

In ninety-nine cases out of one hundred this would have been enough for a spy, but Red Hawk did not slip off and leave the man to his slumbers.

He merely drew off to a spot from which he could watch the door of the shanty and fell to watching it as though the hut contained one under a sentence of death with him as the death-watch.

The night wore on.

The Indian had heard the voices of Lemon and Mustang Merle on the porch after the mysterious voice at the window, but they did not cause him to quit his post.

He saw nothing but the door of Texas Kit's shanty.

At last, after three hours of silent watchfulness, during which the old ranch-house had become quiet, a figure came toward the shanty from the avenue of trees.

Red Hawk did not move, but his eyes saw it

from the moment it appeared, and he was not the person to let it get out of sight with the events of the night fresh in his mind.

The unknown came up to the door of Texas Kit's hut and stopped there.

Red Hawk saw him lay a hand on the latch, gently press it and disappear beyond the threshold.

The door was shut and the Indian kept his station.

Ten minutes passed and it opened again. The figure he had seen enter the shanty came out and glided off as noiselessly as before.

Now the red-skin moved, but not after the gliding figure. Instead, he crept toward the shanty and reached the door. There he crouched for some time with his ear glued to the portal. He heard the deep breathing of the man on the cot, as if the person who had emerged from the shanty had not broken his slumbers.

"Texas Kit does not sleep with his eyes open to-night," muttered the young Apache. "He may not know that he has been visited and that the visitor has departed. Red Hawk will see what has happened—if Texas Kit has received anything from the man who has just crept off."

The red fingers pressed the latch of the shanty door and the red body crept inside.

The heavy breathing of the ranch rider told Red Hawk exactly where he lay and he glided toward the corner and stooped over the sleeper in the dark.

Now the hands of the red-skin began to move as if they were possessed of eyes. They were careful not to touch the skin of the sleeper, but they felt his body just the same.

One hand was slipped under Texas Kit's head and the red fingers found there something which they withdrew, and the next moment their owner was creeping toward the door to open it as silently as before and to glide out into the night.

The Indian's eyes fairly glistened with triumph now. He still clutched that something which he had taken from under the head of the sleeper, and with it in his hand he ran off, nor stopped until he almost fell over a man who was standing guard near one of the stables.

"What's up hyer, you pesky red-skin?" cried the guard.

Red Hawk said nothing but picked himself up and ran on. Down across the pasture ran the young Indian, dodging past trees which seemed determined to bar his progress, but all the time clutching the bit of paper he had stolen from a sleeping man.

The gulch beyond the pasture swallowed him. He disappeared among its shadows, frightening the bats from their crevices of darkness and now and then feeling the brush of a night wing as its possessor flitted down the gloomy place.

At last the run of the Indian came to a close. He stood near a heap of boulders and then, stooping suddenly, vanished as if he had dived beneath the pile. But Red Hawk, the Apache, had done nothing of the kind. He had merely entered a cavernous opening and was groping his way down one of the dark corridors of the mine belonging to Mesquite—that mine for which more than one life had been taken in years ago.

It was not a successful mine now. The keen eyes of the men of Mesquite had found other riches, but the cavern remained with its marks of picks on the hard walls and with some of the old chambers half filled with water and rubbish.

Red Hawk stood in a round-like chamber and had drawn a lucifer across the wall.

He stuck the match into a little opening in the wall and took the paper from his teeth, by which he had held it since entering the mine.

The blazing match showed how eager the young Indian was.

He leaned toward the little light and opened the paper. Outwardly calm, it was evident that he was greatly excited and that he was expecting to be rewarded for his long watch at the door of Texas Kit's shanty.

It was not a scrawl which met the eye of the Indian. The paper was not covered with the rough characters usually made by those whose companions are horse and lasso, but they were neat, even elegant—just that sort of writing which one would not look for in that part of the land.

The friendship existing between Merle and Red Hawk had not been lost on the latter. His desire to learn how to read the white-man's "paper talk" had been gratified, and the moment he saw the writing on the paper in his hand that moment his look changed.

What was it that so excited the young red-

skin? Why did his breath seem to depart from him in a gasp?

There were but three lines across the tiny sheet; but they were enough.

He mastered them in a minute, then, looking up as the match went out, he clutched the paper till it was crumpled into a ball and dashed off.

Back over the same route went Red Hawk, the friend of the ranch.

He reached a spot near the door of Texas Kit's shanty, and, with a sound which was almost a laugh of derision and victory, shook his fist at the hut.

CHAPTER V.

RAIDER DICK AND THE SECRET KEEPER.

On the third morning after the events last recorded a man might have been seen entering a flourishing border town not many miles from Mesquite Ranch.

He was well mounted and equipped for a ride, and sat his steed with the grace of one used to the saddle.

He was looked at by all who noticed him and among these was a young girl with a pair of bright eyes which seemed to increase in brightness from the moment she saw the rider of the black horse.

"I wonder what brings him back to Tarus City so soon?" said the girl, addressing herself. "Has he met with misfortune, or has he returned to muster his men for another raid?"

The rider did not draw rein until he reached a Plaza in the center of Tarus City where he looked toward a building with a long veranda in front, and slid from the saddle.

At the same time a man with a bow and a smirk came out of the hotel and held up a letter.

"That is it, Pedron, old boy," said the stranger. "If you had not come out I should have gone in. How are things here?"

The landlord of the Golden Ace smiled and ran his swarthy fingers through the beard he sported.

"All's well so far as I can see," he said.

"No spies about from anywhere, Pedron?"

"None that I can see."

Meantime the last speaker had broken the seal of the letter and, leaning against his horse, was reading it.

The girl whom we have mentioned was still looking at him from her window which commanded a view of the Square and he seemed to attract her in a singular way.

After awhile the man folded the letter and looked at the landlord who stood near, as if waiting for orders.

"Who brought this letter, Pedron?" he asked.

"Zara, sir."

"When?"

"Last night."

"I suppose he did not know where to find me?"

"That's what he said."

"And went off when he had delivered it to you for safe-keeping?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure he did not tarry in Tarus, Pedron?"

"I am pretty sure he did not."

A short silence followed this reply, during which the man at the horse stroked the fine mustache he had.

A new light seemed to come into his dark eyes.

"Won't you go in?" asked Pedron with another smirk. "You have had a long ride no doubt and—"

"Not now. Don't tempt me, old boy," he laughingly broke in. "I am not here to stay," and he went back to his steed and placed one hand on the rein.

"What is he going away already?" said the girl who had not lost sight of him for a moment. "Pedron, the wily old fox, has given him a letter and, from what I can see, it has changed his plans. Well, if you are going, Dolores Dick, I am not one who will say: 'Good luck go with you.'"

She smiled as she spoke the last words and watched the handsome man vault into the saddle and address a few words to Pedron of the Golden Ace.

The landlord, with something golden which had dropped into his yellow palm, bowed till his hat almost fell to the ground, saw the rider move off and when he had turned a corner, ran back to his hotel and threw the coin into a sack under the counter.

The girl turned from the window and went about her work, which was not very hard.

In years she was young—not past sixteen. Her figure was supple and full of grace and

her face, a little swarthy, but not enough to spoil its beauty, told of warm Southern blood, probably some of that which had at one time coursed through the veins of some old Spanish hidalgo.

She was in a merry mood, though the visit of Dolores Dick had affected it.

Presently she was startled by the sound of footsteps which were not those of a cat, and turning stood before the very man at that moment in her mind.

It was Dolores Dick himself.

He had come upon the girl unawares, having entered the house by the open court and now faced her with a smile of admiration on his pre-possessing face.

"Don't let me frighten you, Inez," said the bandit of the border. "I don't intend to stay long and will not make my visit disagreeable to you, for I catch you in a happy mood."

"I am not frightened, I trust. Why should I be in your presence?" was the prompt reply.

"Good! I dropped in to see if you had made up your mind yet."

In an instant the color which had heightened the girl's beauty vanished from her cheeks and she stood pale and confused before Dolores Dick.

"You have not forgotten what I told you last?"

"Of course I have not."

"I can say no more."

"You mean that you are going to prove stubborn and that you prefer remaining here a prisoner rather than give up a little secret, the surrendering of which would make you none the less contented. Look here, child. Are you sure that you are the sole custodian of that secret? May not some other person have it as well as yourself?"

"Then, why not go to that person for the secret?"

Dolores Dick came closer to the girl whose eyes got a sudden flash and one of her jeweled hands dropped to her side.

"I know what you have there," smiled the raider-outlaw, looking down at her hand. "You need not draw that pearl-hilted dagger which you say is the only legacy your mother left you. I am not going to press you thus far. But you must give up the secret you possess; you must put me on the trail of the lost mine which exists somewhere in this country."

There was no answer. Inez, with her back to the wall of the little room, looked at the outlaw and smiled.

"Zara was here last night," continued Dick.

"I do not know."

"Come! You must have seen the young man."

"I did not see him and I doubt whether he was here, for Zara always calls when he comes to Tarus."

"Another lover, probably, ha, ha! What do you think of Zara now?"

"It is false!" flashed the lips of Inez, the prisoner of Tarus City, for she was nothing else as the reader will discover ere we are done with her. "Zara and I are friends and there is no person who can break our friendship."

Dolores Dick looked down into the eyes of the girl and showed his teeth in a grin calculated to rouse her jealousies.

"To come back to the secret. You will not tell me, eh?" he said.

"I cannot break the vow I made my mother."

"Pshaw! to keep that foolish pledge you will curtail your liberty and beggar yourself."

"Yes."

"Do so, then," and the bandit turned toward the door. "You are still my prisoner and I shall give orders concerning your keeping before I ride from Tarus."

"What do I care?" cried the girl, ending the sentence with a derisive laugh. "But why should the secret I have trouble you so much? There are rich ranches which have not been plundered. Are you afraid of a bullet, Dolores Dick? Do you fear the bullets of the ranch kings of the Southwest? Why don't you plunder Mesquite whose boy owner has become a Croesus since he vanquished Captain Cussed? Yes, why don't you swoop down upon that rich place and not hunt for the secret of the lost mine?"

Dolores Dick heard her through with his hand on the latch of the door and his eye fastened upon her.

"You don't know what may happen to Mesquite within the next few days," he answered. "I have made a discovery that makes my blood hot. I have found an old friend—no, an ancient foe. I have him at my mercy and you ought to know what that is."

"I do know. But why are you here talking

to me when you have an old enemy at your mercy?"

"I am not quite ready to strike," said the bandit. "How would you like a companion, Inez?"

"A fellow prisoner, you mean?"

"Yes, if you still persist in keeping the secret of the mine."

There was no reply for some time. Inez walked over to the window and half-dreamily looked out upon the Plaza.

"Is that your friend yonder?" she asked, turning suddenly toward Dolores Dick but at the same time pointing at the window.

The bandit of the border sprung forward and caught sight of the man who had just drawn rein outside and was looking at the house.

He had just finished a long ride. This was apparent from his dirt-begrimed garments and the yellowish mud on his high boots.

"Some other time," said Dolores Dick with a glance at the girl, and the next moment he strode from the room, one of his hands resting on the butt of a revolver which he drew as he crossed the threshold.

The face of the man in the saddle was dark like the face of a Moor. His hair hung down his back with the profuseness of a woman's tresses, and he showed up like a hard-riden Apollo who, under other circumstances, would have been strikingly handsome.

Dolores Dick saw the man before he had been seen himself. As he reached the court he threw up the revolver he had drawn and the first intimation the rider had of his presence was the sentence he uttered:

"Hands up, Mondragon!"

The occupant of the saddle started, and catching sight of Dolores Dick, sent an oath through his teeth.

He had been caught napping.

CHAPTER VI.

MONDRAGON'S RIDE.

"I DON'T want your life," continued the handsome raider of the border. "I gave you a chance to live when you deserved death, and you will persist in dogging me. You must go."

While he spoke, Dolores Dick was advancing toward the man in the saddle, and in a few seconds he stood alongside the steed, and was looking up into his face.

"Forward! You must quit Tarus at once. I will not have you in my preserves."

"You make a wanderer of me."

"Yes, and you may be thankful that it is not worse. Come; I am going down the street."

Dick seized the rein and led the horse away. The man called Mondragon offered no resistance, and in a short time the two reached a spot beyond the last cabin.

Not until now did the bandit relinquish the rein, and stepping back, he looked into the tensely-drawn countenance of the man with a sinister smile.

"Don't come back any more," he said.

"You mean that if I do, you will shoot me?"

"I mean that it would not be safe for you to come back. I am not to be trifled with."

"But you still know what I want to find out?"

"Never mind that."

"I must know, or I can never die in peace."

Mondragon stretched out both hands in supplication, but the bandit waved him off.

"I will find out some day. I will know what became of my child. I will be in at the death, Dolores Dick. A few more ranches plundered, a few more raids across the border, and then your career will end."

A sudden gleam of rage seemed to light up the raider's eyes.

"Down yonder lie the trails of the border," he cried, springing to Mondragon's side. "Yonder are the roads that lead to safety."

The other grinned.

"You hear me!" cried Dick. "I am fast losing my patience. If you face me a moment longer, I will not be the merciful man I have been, and the vultures may have a feast."

"I have a mind not to object to their having the feast," said Mondragon, sorrowfully. "But, I will go—for the last time."

He emphasized the last words, leaning toward Dick, whose shoulder he would have touched with his skeleton hand if the raider had not drawn back, as if afraid of the contact.

The following moment Mondragon straightened in his saddle, and with a parting look was riding off, watched by the bandit with a singular smile at his lips.

Dolores Dick turned and re-entered the border town.

"I know what I can do," said Mondragon, speaking aloud. "I have never been there, but they would receive me—I know they would."

His steed's gait had fallen into a walk and the reins were lying on his neck.

He had passed beyond sight of the collection of houses which made Tarus City, and the country was rough and uneven. Here and there he saw dark specks in the soft blue sky and smiled as he contemplated them.

"Whose bones shall they pick some day, yours or mine, Dolores Dick? Which one of us is to become the vultures' breakfast? I have seen the time when I would not have shrunk from giving them my own bones to pick, but this morning's interview has given me new life, and, if I can help it, I will never become food for those black demons of the sky. Why not go to him? By Jove, I will!"

A mile further on he turned abruptly to the left, and went through a cactus-dotted valley, and beyond it found an open stretch of ground, over which he urged his steed at a rapid gait.

Some hours passed away, and still the man called Mondragon was in the saddle pushing in a northeasterly direction and with suppressed excitement and desire in his eye.

On, on he rode.

The sun, climbing the hills and looking down upon some of the fairest of God's country, saw this lone man, whose face told of intense mental agony, riding over the landscape, buried in thought not very pleasing.

By and by he lifted his head and saw just ahead a collection of buildings that told him that he was nearing an extensive ranch.

For the first time for hours he showed signs of life. He shaded his eyes with one of his hands and gazed long and anxiously at the houses.

"It is Mesquite!" cried he. "I behold the home of the young ranch king of the Southwest—the boy who is cordially hated by the man I have left behind, as well as by all the bandits and ranch raiders of this region. He has heard of me, and has no particular cause for liking a hair on my head; but I am coming to him, all the same. Why? Because I hate Dolores Dick, the merciless Apollo of the plains."

He now rode to the left again, and in a little time was approaching Mesquite, long ago astir and ready to meet friend or foe.

It was not long before he was seen by sharp eyes, and several herders watched him from the vicinity of the corrals.

In a little while some persons came out of the main house and regarded him from the flower-fringed veranda, and one of these, as Mondragon could see, was a girl.

He did not break his gait, but came on until he could see that one of the occupants of the porch was Mustang Merle himself, but the identity of another one puzzled him.

This one was Lemon, the ex-detective and the father of Coral.

Mondragon rode up to the veranda and there drew rein.

At the same time he touched his hat in a sort of military salute, all the while studying not Merle's features, but the face of the detective.

"What is it, sir?" asked the boy rancher, advancing to the edge of the porch.

"I am here with news which you may consider of importance. I am here to say that I know where the enemy of Mesquite is, and can tell you how best to circumvent him."

"This is glorious, and how opportune, too!" cried Lemon.

"Who are you, sir?"

A grim smile passed over Mondragon's face.

"You have forgotten me, I see, and no wonder. I have changed some of late. I am Rush Mondragon. I am the man whom you hunted three weeks, two years ago—hunted from pillar to post, only to lose him at last among the gulches of the Cactus Spur. The black horse I stole from you to save my own hide is dead. I confess that I rode him to death, and here is your money."

The thin hand of Mondragon was reaching into his bosom, when Mustang Merle checked him.

"Not a dollar!" said the young rancher. "If you bring us news of Dick, the Raider, you pay for Black Wings. Dismount, sir. I have company, but this gentleman is as eager to listen to your news as I am."

Mondragon dismounted, when it was seen that he limped in walking; but when near Lemon he stopped and threw his hands to his face.

The detective was bending toward him and eying him with all his might.

On a sudden he sprung down from the porch and ran toward him. Mondragon drew back and threw out his hand.

"Stand off!" he cried, with the harsh voice of a hunted man. "I know you now, and you are the last person I thought to meet in this country. Are you still after me?"

"No. I am out of the service, but I want to touch the man who gave me such a clever slip ten years ago."

Mondragon was laughing now, but the laugh was a ghastly one.

"I don't want to recall that escape," he said. "I am the only one of the ten who got off in the boat which breasted the waves of the Gulf in order to escape your hand. I thought I knew you awhile ago; now I see you as I saw you then. I am Mondragon here, but in the Crescent City I had another name. Will you take the hand which outwitted you?"

Mondragon held out his hand to Lemon, who did not hesitate a moment, but seized it, and the two shook warmly and with smiles.

By this time a number of Merle's men, seeing a stranger at the house, had gathered about and were looking on. The coming of a man of Mondragon's looks was enough to attract them, especially after the events of the past few days, and the stranger was the recipient of lowering looks and subdued curses.

Near by stood Texas Kit in his high riding-boots and half-civilized garb. His dark brown hair fell over his ample shoulders, and his eagle eyes were riveted upon Mondragon, who, as yet, had not seen him.

"I would like to know what brings that man to the ranch," said Kit, addressing himself.

Suddenly there stepped to Texas Kit's side a figure which he did not see. If he had looked to the right he would have caught sight of the lithe form of Red Hawk, the young Apache, but, for the time being, he saw no one but Mondragon.

Merle invited Mondragon into the house and ordered that his steed be stabled, whereupon Texas Kit seized the rein and led the horse away.

"Men sometimes carry secrets about their saddles," he muttered. "I will look a little and see if this fellow isn't one of that sort."

In a few moments he was at one of the stables and his eager hands were searching the saddle for a clew to the real identity of the man who called himself Mondragon.

All at once he found something that sent a thrill of pleasure through his frame and he drew into the light a few papers so adroitly put away that the sharpest eyes could not have found them.

Texas Kit fell back to the light of the stable window and opened the package.

"Put the papers back, White Kit!" said a voice.

With a sudden start the ranch-rider looked up and ground his teeth.

In the open doorway stood a person whom he feared and hated—Red Hawk, the red guardian of the ranch.

CHAPTER VII.

JOE BUNDY GETS THERE.

TEXAS KIT scowled at the Indian but did not restore the stolen papers to the secret recess underneath the saddle. Red Hawk folded his arms and quietly waited.

The ranch rider knew nothing of the theft of the letter from under his pillow; he was in ignorance of the cunning work of the Apache who had watched his shanty until he saw the living shadow come from beyond the ranch, enter it and, after awhile, steal away as silently as a cat.

"The papers belong to the white man who came to see the young master," said Red Hawk, seeing Texas Kit hesitate. "They are not yours and you have no right to rob him."

Kit bit his lips till the red tide appeared on the nether one.

The hand of the Apache was pointing at the saddle and in the eyes that surveyed him was a look of fearlessness which he knew so well mirrored the Indian's heart.

"I put them back rather than have a quarrel," said Kit at last. "I say, however, that they are dangerous papers for any one to carry to Mesquite, and that the man who carries them is here for no good."

There was no reply, but Kit thought he detected a smile at the red-skin's mouth.

Sullenly he restored the papers to their nest under the saddle, whereupon Red Hawk withdrew but waited outside till he came out and walked off.

"I'll get even with the young red for that trick," growled Texas Kit. "He has played a trump for the time being, but I will show him that I can hold just as good a hand at the end of the game."

Texas Kit walked to the stall that held his own steed, and taking him out, equipped for his

daily duty of riding the boundaries of the ranch, sprung to saddle and galloped off.

After watching him for a spell, Red Hawk walked back to the house and found Joe Bundy basking his long body in the sun like a lazy lizard.

"You've had some fun. I kin see that by yer eye," observed Old Joe, as the young Apache came up.

The eyes of the Indian began to shine.

"Joe is right," he said. "I have just stepped on the tail of a serpent."

"Did he bite?"

In reply Red Hawk stood close to the Yankee and narrated the adventure he had just had. Old Joe listened with some surprise and a grin for the outcome.

"Thar's some sly deviltry afoot on these preserves," remarked Joe, uncrossing his lank limbs and looking up into the face of his scarlet friend. "In the first place, the man what dropped in upon us this mornin' has been a rascal, an' I don't think he's altogether repented yet. He once gave Lemon the slip, an' to-day they met for the first time since then. I don't like the cut o' his jib, but he really hates Dolores Dick from what I can gather; but you know, Red Hawk, we've got ter be keerful whom we trust just now."

The Apache gave just the slightest nod in return and listened to all Old Joe had to say.

When the Yankee had finished, the Indian drew from his bosom a bit of paper which he handed to Joe unfolded.

"Whar did you git this?" asked the old fellow.

"Read it first."

The first word seemed to start Bundy's eyes from his head and the second drew from him an exclamation of wonder.

"He read as follows:

"Why didn't you keep your appointment with me? You know the penalty and it will be enforced if you have the cowardice to betray us. As you have failed to meet me I appoint the time as before—the same interval and the same signal—and you must come to time. Look to the locks and have everything ready. There is to be no failure, else your head must answer for it."

"CAPTAIN D. D."

Old Joe glanced up and caught the eye overhead.

"Whar did you git this, I say?" he cried.

"I stole it," coolly replied Red Hawk.

"From the man what came in this morning?"

"No."

"From whom, then?"

"From White Kit."

"Jebosaphat!" exclaimed the long-jointed Northerner. "How could you take anything from a cat like that?"

A few words from Red Hawk told all, but did not take from Old Joe's eyes the stare of incredulity.

"Whar is he now?"

"Out yonder," said Red Hawk, pointing over the landscape. "He is out at work."

"Riding the ranch, eh?"

"Yes."

Old Joe was erect now, his tall figure towering above the Indian's like a pine above a reed. He shaded his eyes and looked in the direction indicated by Red Hawk's finger and sprung from the porch.

"The sooner we settle with this spy the better, Red Hawk," he cried.

"Let him come back."

"But he may not, after what happened at the stable."

"If he is serving the man who took the talking paper to him he will return. He must carry out his part of the plot or lose his life, says the paper."

"So it does, but he may be afraid of your telling what happened in the stall. I'm in for balking him before he can run off."

Red Hawk did not speak.

"Captain D. D." read Joe looking at the letter. "That means Dolores Dick. Red Hawk, the raider-outlaw has had a spy in our midst for months. Texas Kit came hither for the sole purpose of taking observations for his chief. He knows who branded the cattle and whose infernal hand marked Coral Lemon for life."

"He knows," sententiously said the young red-skin.

"What, let that slick devil get away?" resumed old Joe. "It makes my blood hot to think of him. No, we must corral him now or lose him perhaps forever. He knows when the storm is to break over Mesquite. He knows all about the plot that is brewing, and to meet it we must force from him the solid truth."

The young Indian looked silently toward the pasture and beyond.

"You won't go, eh?" cried Joe. "Wal, let me 'tend to the sarpint. I want ter stretch my limbs anyhow."

Old Joe moved off followed by the Indian who admonished him to be cautious; and saddling his horse he was soon riding toward that part of the ranch where he expected to find Texas Kit on duty.

Red Hawk and Joe had come to the conclusion that if the Indian accompanied Joe, the ranch ride; and suspected traitor might take warning and avoid both, and as the Yankee was in the habit of riding everywhere and at all times, it was agreed that it would be best for him to go out alone.

"This beats my time all holler," said Joe to himself when he was in the saddle and riding slowly across the country. "It reminds me of the times when we war fighting Captain Cussed, and his Bravos; but here we have a man more cunning than him and he has had a spy among us for, heaven knows how long."

He rode toward a rise from which he could obtain a fine view of the surrounding country. From the hill he could look to the end of Mesquite, catching sight of the large herds belonging to the boy rancher, and see the herdsmen on their steeds, mere specks on the plains.

Old Joe carried across the saddle-bow the inseparable rifle without which he never went abroad. He was as quick with it as the cowboy is with the revolver, and more than one bandit had discovered, when too late, that the brown mummied hands of Joe Bundy were as lively as those of the active desperado.

For some time Joe did not see the one object he sought that warm day.

At length he observed something dark moving along a distant ridge and saying: "Thar he is," touched his horse with the spur and dashed down the hill.

The keen eye of the Yankee scout soon discovered that the first look had not deceived him, for as he rode on he made out the figure of Texas Kit and presently the ranch rider drew up and looked at him.

Joe now slackened the speed of his horse and cantered over the rising ground toward the man he wanted.

Texas appeared to await him without the first signs of suspicion, and Joe was riding up when he slyly moved his hand toward his hip. It was a movement which would have escaped nineteen eyes out of every twenty, but the twentieth one was pretty sure to be Joe Bundy's.

But a few rods separated the pair now, and Old Joe, with his hand carelessly, as it seemed, on the breech of his Winchester, was riding straight toward Texas Kit.

"What's up, Joe?" called Kit, in his usual tones.

"Oh, I'm out for a ride," was the reply. "I thought, mebbe, I might find out something about that branding rascal, an' thought, too, that I would take a whiff o' air o' the kind what does one's soul good."

There was a light laugh on Texas Kit's part, but the next moment the scene changed.

Old Joe saw the look which flashed up in the young rancher's eyes. He saw, too, the hand that appeared from behind the man with a revolver in its clutch, and the next instant the Winchester bounded upward from the saddle-bow.

"Hands up!" cried Texas Kit, sending out and upward the cocked revolver.

"Hands down!" was the response that came over the leveled rifle.

There was a sharp report—it was followed by another, the two so close together that they really seemed but one—and the man who reeled in the saddle, and finally pitched backward to the grass, held still gripped in his hand the six-shooter he had just discharged.

Old Joe Bundy rode forward through the lifting smoke. He halted over the form on the ground and looked down.

"The Bundys always get thar!" was all he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE WOLF'S JAWS.

THE man who rode back over the ground toward Mesquite Ranch was Old Joe Bundy.

He dismounted in front of the ranch-house and went inside. In a few minutes he came out, and with a comical expression on his swarthy face, led his horse to the stables.

As night drew on Texas Kit, the ranch rider, was not seen to come in from his daily work,

and the herdsmen wondered why he did not come. Some of them strained their eyes toward the west, but could not catch sight of him, and by and by they began to ask one another if he had not given them the slip, and gone back to that wild life which he led, according to tradition, before he threw his first lasso for Mustang Merle.

Night deepened, and those who were always on the alert saw the guards at the corral doubled, as though Merle expected the double-brander to come back and play his secret hand again.

The young rancher stood in the parlor of the ranch, listening to a story of his past life told by Mondragon, who had come to them with tidings of Dolores Dick, and how that handsome bandit prince managed his raiding campaigns from Tarus City, which was his headquarters at all times, and where he regarded himself safe from retaliation.

At the conclusion of Mondragon's story, Mustang Merle was silent for a moment.

"We ought to know just when Dick intends to swoop down upon the ranch," said he.

"But how will we get that piece of valuable information?" inquired Lemon.

"There seems but one sure way," was the reply. "We should have a spy in the enemy's camp."

Mondragon nodded, then slowly shook his head.

"That would be dangerous for the spy."

"True; but spies have undertaken tasks just as dangerous and escaped," asserted Merle. "I would like to see for myself how Dick is entrenched in his stronghold. If we are to carry the war into Africa, and in my opinion that is the only way to beat this villain, we must know how to meet him on his own ground."

Mondragon looked up with surprise.

"But Dolores Dick is as sharp as an Indian. He is as suspicious as a fox. To beat him at his own game is impossible un ess--"

"Unless what?" broke in the young rancher.

"Unless one is found who is his equal. The life of a spy in Tarus City would not be worth a husk if he was caught."

"Granted."

"There would be no trial."

"Dick would shoot him down at sight, eh?"

"It might be worse than that."

Mustang Merle smiled.

"I propose to meet this man on his own ground unless he comes to night," he said.

"When?"

"When I shall have discovered his weak points."

"But he has none, this man-vulture of the border."

"Don't tell me that. All men have their weak points, I care not how strong they appear to be. I am going to Tarus!"

Both Mondragon and Lemon fell back with stares of astonishment.

What, the boy master of Mesquite go into the very den of the foe and play spy in the shadow of noose and pistol?

"Gentlemen, you seem to forget that I met and vanquished Captain Cussed," said Merle calmly. "I have met also this very raider whom we so cordially hate just now. I know something about him and he can be met on his own ground and met successfully."

"But the suspicions he will have toward any stranger!" put in Lemon. "Think you not he will not be on the alert? Why, he may have a spy on this very ranch."

"He has none here," replied Merle significantly. "He had a spy here, but he has none now."

What did Merle mean by speaking so emphatically! Ah, Mondragon and Lemon had not heard the report Old Joe Bundy brought in from the rising ground beyond the pasture, and they knew nothing of the corpse lying even then under the stars with a little mound upon the breast in which would never beat again the heart of a traitor.

"I shall go," reiterated Merle. "Keep the secret for me."

"We will if you are determined."

That was all. The night wore on, the long hours watched out by the faithful spirits of Mesquite, and, in time, the new day came again, brightening the landscape and dispelling dew from grass and flower.

Joe Bundy stood on the lawn in front of the house looking over the ground which lay between him and a spot that held a dark secret, and Red Hawk, the Apache, was watching him from a distance, for he, too, knew what had taken place on the confines of the ranch and why Texas Kit had not returned.

All at once a footstep sounded behind Old

Joe and he looked into the face of Coral, the detective's child.

The girl came forward with her unscarred cheek turned from the Yankee scout, and he at first thought the scar of the brand had disappeared and was about to congratulate her when she spoke.

"You have been nearly all over the country, Mr. Bundy?"

"Thar's no Mr. Bundy, beg yer pardon," said the old man. "I'm just Joe, 'Old Joe's' better, for I've passed my beauty days and don't expect ter be in the matrimonial market any more."

Coral smiled.

"Let it be 'Joe,' then," she said. "I was going to ask you if you ever in your travels came across any one who could remove scars and the like."

The old man, nonplused for a moment, ran his hand through his scattering beard.

"Nobody but a little old hermit; but he's been dead these many years."

The fair girl sighed, telling Joe how disappointing his answer was.

"Are you sure he is dead, Joe?"

"Why, to be sure. Nobody, not even these old hermits, live forever. Hold on, Coral; I once saw another person who knew about all thar war worth knowing; he's livin' yet."

"Near us?"

"Yes, but on mighty dangerous ground. He lives in Tarus City, the stampin'-round of the man who proposes ter drop in hyer some time and plunder the ranch."

The girl, in her eagerness brought about by Old Joe's first words, had come so close that she touched his sleeve.

"Where is Tarus City?" she asked.

"It's out yonder, a good many miles," and Bundy pointed away over the swelling ground.

Coral looked and an expression of sadness settled over her face.

"What is his name?"

"They call him Wizard Wool."

She seemed to make a mental note of the strange name.

"I don't say that he knows how to remove brands, beg yer pardon again—but when I saw him last, and that was some time ago, I thought that what he didn't know wasn't worth knowing."

Coral relapsed into silence during which Old Joe saw her gaze wander across the landscape, and he thought he could read how eager she was to meet the man of whom he had spoken.

"Would you like ter see Wizard Wool?" asked Old Joe.

The detective's daughter started and seized the Yankee's arm.

"Look!" she cried, suddenly turning to him the scarred cheek, showing the brand of the avenger. "Do you think I want to carry this accursed mark through life? I want to see my cheek as fair as it was before I was branded by the masked man—by Dolores Dick, as I believe him to have been. No! a thousand times no!"

She paused abruptly, for at that moment the door of the house opened and the detective came out. In a moment Coral placed her finger upon her lips, and with a smile which meant much, turned about and re-entered the ranch home.

The girl's eagerness to lose the disfiguring brand had not been lost on Joe Bundy. He walked off as soon as he could get away from Lemon and sought out Red Hawk.

The two friends had a long talk where they could not be overheard, and Old Joe made some singular diagrams in the sand where they had consulted.

"It is risky, I'll admit, but it's for the girl," said the Yankee. "You don't want ter see her go through life with that infernal mark on her pretty face?"

"Why, Red Hawk would give one of his arms to remove it if he could!"

"I know that, chief. The man who made that mark knows how it can be removed, if such a thing is possible."

The Indian made no reply.

"Of course it's risky," continued Joe. "But I think enough of the gal ter try the schema."

The two went back to the house.

"To-night," said Bundy, at parting. "Red Hawk, I guess I kin get myself up in proper fixings. If Wizard Wool knows, by Jupiter! he shall tell how to do it!"

There was fierce determination in voice and look and Joe Bundy's lips seemed welded together when he turned away and entered his own quarters.

The long day drew to a close. The western wind stirred the grass on hill and plain and the herdsmen brought the herd back to the corral.

During the day Mustang Merle had not shown up, and those who did know the truth were told that he had ridden over to Ranch No. 6 Mesquite's nearest neighbor, and would be gone some time.

Old Joe Bundy was about to step out of his shanty when the door was thrown open and Lemon almost fell inside.

"My child! my child!" cried the detective. "She has gone to Tarus to have the accursed brand removed or die!"

Joe Bundy did not recover his breath for some time. He stood thunderstruck before the agonized father, but clinched his hands and said:

"Why didn't the last o' the Bundys keep his mouth shut?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TELL-TALE BRAND.

DOLORES DICK when not in the saddle was to be found in Tarus City. There were planned some of the most successful raids along the border, and from Tarus had ridden the plundering bands of the Southwest.

The place consisted of about one hundred houses a good many of which were gambling dens where the outlaws lost their gains and sometimes fought over the spoil of raid and foray.

Tarus had, too, an unsettled population. It was a sort of half-way place for adventurers who were seeking new fields of adventure and it was known that beyond it lay a region said to be very rich in valuable metals.

It was to this region that Lemon and his child were going when they found themselves pursued by their old enemy, and when they fell into the way of Joe Bundy by whom they were conducted to Mesquites, as we have seen.

The morning of the day after the last events recorded above a young man rode into Tarus.

He looked very unlike the person he really was, and when he drew rein in front of the Golden Ace he became a target for many eyes.

Apparently oblivious of the attention he was attracting, he quietly slipped to the ground and crossed the porch of the hotel and walked inside.

"I've a notion to rest here for a few days," said he, looking at Pedron, the proprietor.

"It's a good place ter rest in, Tarus is," was the reply. "We don't have very many angels here, that's a fact, but it's a lively place an' one don't die o' seein' little or nothin' here."

The youth said he was on his way to the Silver Country where he expected to "strike it rich," and in another moment had bargained with Pedron to be his guest while he rested in Tarus City.

His horse was taken to the stables attached to the hotel and in a little while the new-comer was out on the porch talking with the men loafing there.

His manner, coupled with the story he told, rather amused them and when he invited them inside for a treat, at the same time exhibiting a good purse, he became a favorite and they voted him a good fellow.

The sun creeping up found the boy silver-hunter fairly acquainted with the denizens of Tarus City. He had taken several walks through the place, but had not entered any of the dens that had wide open doors for the purpose.

When he went back to Pedron's Hotel there was a satisfied smile on his face.

"I'm getting along very well," he said to himself. "As yet, I am not suspected. It is true I haven't stood face to face with Dolores Dick, but I think I am disguised so as to fool his keen eyes. I did not come to Tarus to fail for I know what failure means," and the smile faded for a moment.

We need not mention after this that the boy was Mustang Merle in the camp of the enemy.

He had braved death in coming to Tarus for the purpose of finding out Dolores Dick's strength and his weak places, if he had any; but he was not prepared for the event which was so near at hand.

The long day drew to a close without having brought the handsome bandit back to Tarus.

The shadows of the shanties lengthened on the yellowish ground, the gambling dens were lit up, and the loud laugh and curse came from them all.

Mustang Merle, standing on the veranda of the Golden Ace, and looking out upon the Plaza, saw reach the spot a horseman who sprung from the saddle and ran toward the house.

In an instant a thrill passed through him. Dolores Dick had come back at last!

The bandit passed so near Merle that the latter

could have touched him, but he did not move. He heard the outlaw and Pedron exchanging words at the bar, but refrained from turning his head, lest he should excite suspicion or call attention to himself, two things which he did not want done just at that time.

"I've got a new guest, Dick," said the landlord.

"Eh? Business is looking up, Pedron?"

The landlord of the Golden Ace broke into a laugh.

"He won't stay long, no' long enough for the boys to fleece him, I fear," replied Pedron. "He's but a boy, going down into the Silver Lands to make a stake there if possible. What's new?"

"Nothing," growled Dolores Dick. "I've got a fool on the ground, that's what I know. He failed to keep his appointment, and I have sent him word that I won't stand this kind of business. When I have a spy in the enemy's camp, I want him to do his duty."

"That's right."

"I think he will when he reads what I left with him," continued the outlaw.

These words almost startled Mustang Merle. He knew for certain that Joe Bundy had not shot Texas Kit without cause; that the ranch rider was the bandit's spy, and that he had not died undeservedly. Every word that fell from Dolores Dick's tongue reached the young owner of the ranch and he realized more than ever the dangers that hemmed him in.

Presently the heavy footstep of Dick was heard, and he came slouching out of the hotel. Once more he passed quite near the boy rancher and went to the steed he had left in the center of the Square.

Merle watched him until horse and man disappeared, and then he slipped into the house and went up to the room which he had engaged from Pedron.

The hotel was a two-story building, and Merle found that his room fronted the Plaza, a view of which it commanded. The moon had risen and the boy rancher did not retire.

He wanted to think over Dolores Dick's return. He was very anxious to meet him with a cool head and preferred to sleep before the encounter and scrutiny which he knew would take place on the following day.

He could hear voices and the clinking of glasses in the rooms below. He heard also the voice of Pedron and now and then the loud laughter of the men who followed Dick on his raid whenever he had anything for them to plunder.

But Merle locked his door and retired at last.

He was still awake when he heard a footstep come up the bare steps and stop at the threshold.

It had tried to exercise caution, but the heavy boots could not deceive the young rancher and he listened to the tread and wondered if he was to be summoned below for inspection.

"I won't disturb him for he's asleep already," he heard a voice say and he thought Pedron had spoken. "They can see him to-morrow just as well as to-night, an' Dick can question him about the ranches to the east as well then as now."

The feet withdrew and Merle heard their owner report to the crowd below.

Summoned before Dolores Dick and questioned concerning the rich ranches beyond Tarus:

The thought thrilled him and for a second blanched his cheeks.

He had not expected this, but Joe Bundy had warned him to be ready for anything.

"You may run ag'in' Dick himself; so keep a cool head on yer shoulders and don't let it get away with you."

These were the last words he had heard from the last of the Bundys.

Mustang Merle went back to bed, but not to sleep. He lay awake and listened to the carousal in the bar-room of the Golden Ace; he heard the loud laughter of the roughs of the border and now and then a song that suited well the orgies they were carrying on.

All at once he heard another sound which seemed to still the hilarity in the bar-room and the next moment there was a rush toward the porch. Merle went to the window and looked out upon the Plaza.

He saw there a group of men clustered round a horse upon which a girlish figure was seated. He could make out that the horse was fatigued and that his rider was as tired as he.

One of the men helped her down and the rest drew back. Merle saw that she was thankful for the assistance and the following moment he heard her address the crowd.

"Have you in Tarus City a man named Wizard Wool?" she asked.

A laugh was the first answer; but the one who had helped her to alight said,

"A girl as pretty as you don't want ter see that old rascallion, I hope. Yes, he is livin' with us, but we don't like ter own it, seein' that we are gentlemen while—"

"Never mind that. I must see this man whatever he is," was the interruption.

"When?"

"Now."

Merle saw by the light of the moon the very wonderment which filled the eyes of the toughs of Tarus City.

"Wait, here comes the captain," cried a voice on the outside of the crowd, and the whole lot turned toward a man who was advancing toward them.

"Dolores Dick," ejaculated the boy rancher.

"What will happen now?"

He watched the man who came up and saw him stop in front of the girl.

The whole group was just beneath Merle's window, and a broken pane enabled him to catch every word as it was spoken.

"This young lady wants ter see Wizard Wool," said one of the men, looking at the handsome bandit while he covered the girl with his finger.

Dolores Dick leaned toward the new-comer and met her look with a smile on his face.

He had not spoken when one of the men cried out:

"Bless me if she ain't branded like a steer!"

A sudden thrill like an arrow of ice went to Mustang Merle's heart, and springing back he caught up a revolver, and cried:

"The girl down there is Coral Lemon! She has come into a den of lions!"

CHAPTER X.

UNMASKED.

CORAL seemed to realize her situation all at once.

She fell back from before the face of the raider-outlaw and went to her steed.

"Not so fast," said Dick, following her. "Remember you have not seen the person after whom you have just inquired. I can take you to him, but this need not be done till morning, as you are tired. How far have you come?"

The detective's child was silent and very white of face. She turned upon the bandit and looked him in the eye a full minute before she spoke again.

"I did not think I was doing so much," she said. "I do not wish to see Wizard Wool now. Some other time will do."

Dolores Dick stood at her horse's head and his hand rested on the dropped rein.

"Pedron has a room for you and a good bed besides, not as soft, perhaps, as you have been used to, but good enough to afford an excellent sleep. Take the young lady's horse to my stable, Noland, and one of you apprise Pedron of the expected guest."

Coral now stood in the moonlight like a person in a maze.

"Where am I?" she cried. "In Heaven's name why did I carry out my foolish determination? I should have been willing to wear the accursed brand instead of coming here. Father, forgive your child!"

The hand of Dolores Dick touched her wrist at this moment, but she shrunk away with a cry.

"Not you!" she exclaimed. "I know you now."

"Then I need not reveal myself," answered the bandit, with a smile.

"No; the letter received at Santa Leo and the brand I wear on my cheek tell the truth. You are the foe of our house—you are Dolores Dick, the outlaw of the border."

The hand of the bandit went up to the brim of his white hat and he doffed it with a bow from which Merle saw Coral turn with a shudder.

The next moment the leader of the border raiders was escorting the trembling girl toward the hotel, the men following at a respectful distance, eager to see in the light of Pedron's lamps the figure seen to be so full of grace in the beams of the moon.

The boy rancher watched the procession till it passed under the roof of the veranda and was lost to sight.

Then he leaned against the door of his room and listened. He heard Pedron introduced to his unwilling guest, who was silent; he heard several rough comments on her lustrous eyes, and in the end heard the landlord say that she

should have the best room in the house—"a room fit for a queen," as the border Boniface put it.

A few moments later Merle heard the creaking of the stair and then a door opened and closed. Coral, now a prisoner of the bitterest enemy her father had ever had, was alone in her chamber, and Pedron had gone back to the bar-room.

Merle longed to assure Coral that while he remained in the camp of the bandits, she would have a friend, though that friendship revealed his own identity, and drew about him the coils of destruction; but he debated the advisability of telling her this at that time.

He knew nothing about the interior arrangement of the hotel, and an attempt to reach Coral might expose him to the very eyes he wished to avoid, and bring about a disclosure from which he shrank.

By and by the place grew still. He could hear the loud laughter that came from the wide-open dens of Tarus; he could hear the sonorous snores of the early-retiring guests of Pedron; but not a sound from that part of the house to which Coral had been conducted to regret in silence and all alone the mad exploit she had perpetrated.

Why had she risked so much to find the man called Wizard Wool? What was he to her that she should abandon her father and ride from Mesquite, where she was safe, right into the den of the wolf—into the clutches of the man who would have given the spoil of his most successful raid to get her completely in his power?

Mustang Merle felt the dreary hours of that eventful night drag themselves away. He hailed with mingled delight and fear the first streaks of day that shot up from the east, and they found him at the window looking out across the Plaza.

Presently there came into the Square a man who at once attracted his attention. He was tall and old; a long, gray beard lay upon his breast, and his step was as steady as that of a man not one-half his age.

This individual was advancing toward the hotel, when a voice called to him, and he stopped and awaited the approach of Dolores Dick, who, dressed in the dress-parade style of a border tough, came forward.

The outlaw never looked so handsome as at that moment. Merle could not help admiring his old enemy who, in his wide-rimmed hat surmounted with a graceful feather, and his waist encircled by a gaudy sash, looked more like a rich *caballero* than a bandit prince.

The two men came together where the first one had halted.

"What is she like?" asked the one with the gray beard.

"What, you know she is here, then?" answered Dick.

"I know it. She came to see me, though on what mission I cannot conceive."

"You might guess, if I were to tell you what your informant probably omitted. She wears on her cheek a brand which mars her beauty."

"Ah! that young girl?"

"Yes. She may want it removed."

The man addressed looked steadily into Dolores Dick's eye a moment and then laughed.

"You know what I can do in that line, Captain Dick," said he.

"I do; but you are not to proceed without my sanction."

The other bowed.

"She will apply to you, Wizard Wool, for the obliteration of that scar on her cheek; but without my consent you are not to touch the job."

"I fully understand you, Captain Dick. You know I am willing to serve you."

"All right. We'll see her together."

The two came toward the hotel and Merle heard their footsteps in the bar-room.

"The angel who dropped in upon us did not get much sleep last night," said Pedron. "I heard her at all hours and I don't think she'll be as trim as a sparrow this morning."

"We'd like to see her, Pedron."

Half a minute later Merle with his door ajar heard a step that sent a thrill through his frame. Coral was coming down stairs with the landlord of the Golden Ace.

The rancher in his eagerness stepped outside of his room and went down the steps. They were dark and creaky, but he managed to reach the door that opened into the bar-room without exciting suspicion.

There was in this door a ragged hole which spoke eloquently of a bar-room fight at some remote period of the Golden Ace's history, and the boy rancher put his eye to the spot.

He saw Coral ushered into the presence of the two men waiting for her.

If the girl had not slept, as Pedron had reported, she looked fresh and beautiful despite the disfiguring brand, and the moment she saw Wizard Wool she went toward him, but all at once fell back.

"This is the gentleman you sought last night," said Dolores Dick, waving his hand toward the gray-bearded man.

Coral stood still.

"So he is the man who knows so much," she said. "He is the person whose learning filled my heart with a consuming desire to test it and drove me from my father, to have him touch the brand on my cheek. But now I wish I had remained with him with the scar where it is, and—"

The sudden coming forward of Wizard Wool broke the girl's sentence and she fell back, looking strangely at him while a smile lurked in his beard.

"Who is your father?" asked the bandit.

In an instant Coral had turned and was facing the handsome outlaw.

"Why ask me this?" she cried. "Why ask me to reveal that which you already know? You are Dolores Dick, but in the past you had another name and my father drove you from your old stamping-ground and the accursed mark on my cheek tells how good your memory is. I need not speak my father's name to you. If you are Wizard Wool," she turned to the gray-beard, "you are the cause of my coming hither. But sooner than lose this brand at the hand of one who is the friend of our foe, I will willingly carry it through life. No, your hand shall not touch the mark I bear, Wizard Wool!"

A laugh broke from Dolores Dick's throat.

"You have the grit of your father," he cried.

"You've seen it tested, have you? You know that he feared nothing when he was in the service of the Government whose outlaw you were even then. You can not keep me here. I have a right to go back to my father. I will take the mark along. My horse has rested. Stand back and let me go!"

Mustang Merle saw Coral stride toward the porch, but he saw, too, the hand of the outlaw reach out and seize her arm.

"This is free America; you dare not detain me!" she cried, breaking away.

"But it is Tarus City, as well," was the quick retort. "Girl, you have put yourself in the web and the meshes will hold you till we get even with your father and the young rancher who has given him asylum. Pedron, is the boy up yet?"

"I'll see, sir," said the landlord of the Golden Ace, moving toward the stair door.

"I'll save him some trouble," came from between the welded and white lips of the young spy and the next instant the door was thrown open and Merle of Mesquite sprung into the room.

He caught the eye of Dolores Dick the moment he landed in the place.

"I thought so!" cried the border bandit. "I would have bet a thousand to one on your identity."

CHAPTER XI.

CHANGING FORTUNES.

In the brief silence that followed the raider-outlaw's exclamation, Coral regarded the boy rancher with a strange expression.

There was a look in the eyes which seemed to tell her that she had seen their owner before, yet the garb he wore, on the other hand, was inclined to throw her off the track.

Merle stood erect before the bandit and his companions and regarded him with a look that seemed to surprise him.

"Yes," continued Dolores Dick, "I would have staked a thousand to one on the proposition. When I heard that my friend Pedron had a guest, and that the guest was a boy, I thought at once of you, and said to myself: 'We will have some sport to-morrow,' and to-morrow is here."

The next moment all seemed to break in upon Coral, and she took a step toward the boy rancher.

"Ah, you know him, too, do you?" grinned Dick. "Well, that proves that I was right. Mustang Merle, you have been convicted of coming to the enemy's camp in disguise."

The owner of Mesquite did not quail.

"Is that the boy king of the ranch?" queried Pedron, laughing as he leaned forward and eyed the boy. "Is that the boy who finished Captain Cussed, my old friend of 'other days? Well, well, I did not expect to entertain him, but

strange things happen," and Pedron laughed again.

By this time a dozen rough men had congregated in front of the hotel, and Dolores Dick, hearing their voices, went to the door and met them.

"I have a surprise for you, boys," said he. "The fox of the valley has walked into a trap of his own setting, and I will show him to you in a few moments."

Coming back into the hotel, he strode up to where Merle and Coral stood, and said in low tones:

"You are now the guests of Captain Dick."

Merle drew back and mechanically placed his hand on his revolver, at which the bandit only smiled.

"It does not pay to use such things in this camp, especially when the user does not belong to the brotherhood of the border. My men want to see both of you, and together, of course."

The door was flung open, and at a signal from Dick the crowd outside began to appear.

"That is the fox," said Dick, covering Merle with his finger. "That is the boy who defies the rovers of the Southwest—Merle of Mesquite!"

In spite of themselves, the tough-looking men fell back, for it did not seem possible that the boy rancher would invade their city where they were masters; but the earnestness of their leader's voice convinced them that he could not be mistaken.

"I am Merle of Mesquite," answered the boy. "I am the owner of the ranch against which Captain Red Jacket finally charged in vain. This young lady is my friend, and he who harms her harms me."

A coarse laugh followed these words and all eyes were turned to Dolores Dick.

"The young lady referred to is the child of a man who long ago gave me a good deal of trouble," said he.

"That is true," cried Coral. "Men, your leader is a counterfeiter who escaped from my father, then a detective employed to hunt down his band. He has been on our trail ever since we entered this region in hopes of bettering our condition. Ask him to whom I owe the horrid mark I wear on my cheek. Ask him who came in upon me at Mesquite and branded me before I could escape. That is what he calls 'getting even.' Such is the vengeance of a man who is an outlaw under the flag of the nation—such the cowardly revenge of the man who calls himself Dolores Dick."

The face of the bandit changed color under the words of the detective's child.

"A part of that I deny," he said. "I never applied the brand to your cheek. I never saw you at Mesquite."

"Who did it, then?" demanded Coral.

"Ask me not."

"But it is your brand," cried Merle. "The triangle and the D give you away."

"Silence!" roared the bandit. "When you are asked to speak you will speak."

Half an hour later the young owner of Mesquite stood in a darkened room. He knew he was the tenant of a shanty to which he had been conducted by the men of Tarus at Dick's command, and the walls of wood told him that he was as securely confined as though they had been walls of stone.

Such had been the result of his visit to the camp of the foe. He had been unmoved and that sooner than he expected by his eagerness to protect Coral, the detective's daughter; but if Dick had suspected his identity from the first the unmasking would have taken place anyhow.

He did not know what had become of the girl, nor to what indignities she had been subjected by her father's foe. As for himself, he could pace the hard floor of the shanty and now and then get a glimpse of the declining day, through the scanty window which did not reveal much.

By-and-by there came to the door a heavy脚步, which stopped there, and a moment later Merle saw between him and the light, a burly figure which was not that of Dolores Dick, the bandit of the border.

The man sidled into the hut and closed the door.

Merle saw him standing in the dim light and felt that he was eying him with the coolness of a bravo.

"Boy?"

At sound of the voice Merle started forward, but stopped midway and looked in wonder at the man.

"I guess it's all right," said the same voice, and Merle sprung on and seized the speaker's wrists.

"In Heaven's name how did you get in here?" he cried.

"Not so loud. A camel may go through the eye of a needle, but it takes awful squeezin', an' it took some powerful work for me ter git in hyer. I didn't have ter grease myself, either, for the Bundys ar' slick enough without that."

Joe Bundy had come to him. The last man expected had turned up in a wonderful manner, and stood beneath the same roof that sheltered him. But for the grip of the long fingers, and the parchment face of the old man, Merle would have thought himself in the midst of a dream.

"I calculste that I'm on forbidden ground; but what could I do but come here to look after the gal whom I foolishly sent on this wild-goose chase, by tellin' her that in Tarus thar war a man who knew how ter remove brands and sich things? I got her into the scrape, an' said to myself: 'Joe Bundy, it's yer duty ter git her out,' an' that's why I'm hyer."

The two friends stood together for a few moments.

The hours had flown faster than Merle had taken note of them. The sun had declined.

"They don't know me from Adam's off ox," said Old Joe, with one of his peculiar grins. "I've got myself up as a Tarus citizen, and they all look alike. You see the man who has been guardin' you hyer was induced ter go down ter the Golden Ace and wet his whistle, an' I offered ter take his place. Clever, eh?"

"Clever but dangerous," responded Merle.

"That's what makes it excitin'. The Bundys always liked a little danger sandwiched between their acts. Mebbe the guard is comin' back, though I told him not ter be in any hurry."

Old Joe went to the door and looked out.

"Hyer he comes," said he, looking back over his shoulder. "I've got ter play another game just now. What's my mission? I'm hyer ter save the gal who got into trouble on my account, an' I won't let you be beaten by the clever rascal who wears the red sash with the gold fringe."

The next moment the door shut and Old Joe was on the outside again.

Merle, going to the window, saw the tall guard come up and thank the Yankee for his kindness, adding that he might go to the Golden Ace himself, and drink on his credit.

"Don't keer if I do," said Joe. "You don't seem to have a very noisy prisoner in thar."

"Uncommonly quiet for the person he is, an' considerin' what he's been used to at home."

"What do you think they will do with him?"

Merle saw the guard beckon Old Joe forward, and then he almost touched the Yankee's face with his lips.

"I guess he'll stay here awhile, an' when he goes back to Mesquite, if he goes back at all, he won't know the ranch."

Despite the tones Merle caught every word and fell back pale for a moment.

"So I am to remain here while Mesquite is plundered by Dolores Dick!" he exclaimed. "When will the scoundrel attempt to carry out his plot? The guard said 'if he gets back at all.' What does that mean? Does the bandit of the border think of something worse than mere imprisonment?"

He heard Joe Bundy walk off and knew that once more he was under the eye of the guard who had been set over him by the captain of the raiders.

What had become of Coral? Was she still Pedron's guest? Or had she been transferred to Dolores Dick's home?

He saw the day vanish, wondering what the night would bring forth in his changing fortunes; he saw the last flashes of light disappear in the west, and while contemplating the falling shadows he saw something which was not a shadow of night.

It came to the very door of the hut. The guard there started up and challenged it, but a word caused him to fall back and as the door opened a man stepped forward.

Mustang Merle sprung forward with a cry of joy forming on his tongue, but the next second, or as a hand fell upon his shoulder his gladness vanished:

"Come; we are going to ride!" said a voice, and the young owner of Mesquite looked into the handsome but triumphant face of Dolores Dick.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNDERGROUND TRAIL.

"GOING to ride?" cried the boy rancher, sharply. "What do you mean?"

The raider of the border looked down into the astonished face of his prisoner and smiled.

"You shall see, come!" he replied.

The hand of Dolores Dick had fastened on

Merle's wrist and he was conducted over the sill.

They passed out into the night, leaving the guard on duty as before, but with no one to guard now, and walked toward the Plaza. But Dick led his young hostess around the Square and the two passed out of the city.

Tethered under the shadow of a young tree stood two horses and the moment the boy rancher saw them he knew that a ride of some kind was intended.

"Mount; take your choice of steeds," said the outlaw.

Mustang Merle had already noticed that the horses were united with a strong cord like a dark lasso which extended from saddle to saddle, as if the raider was afraid he would escape by some trick; but he said nothing but vaulted into the nearest saddle and looked at his foe.

Instead of mounting the other steed, Dolores Dick gave a low whistle and there bounded from the shadow of another tree a man who touched his hat as he halted.

"Your escort, Merle," said Dick.

"My escort?"

"Why not?" smiled the bandit. "You are about to take a ride, the like of which you have never experienced. You will need an escort. Don't forget, Noland!"

The man touched his hat again and said he would not.

"Good-by, boy," continued the handsome bandit looking at the wondering Merle. "This is tit for tat. You are about to begin a thrilling ride, but Noland will be with you a part of the time. You have never heard of the underground trail eh?"

"The underground trail?" echoed the young rancher.

"Yes. It really exists, though it has been regarded as a hoax for years. It is a wonderful trail abounding in startling scenes and all that. Noland will not go all the way with you for that would be against my orders. Ah, good-by now. We will see that the old ranch don't suffer very much."

The bandit of the Southwest turned away as he uttered the last word and the next moment Merle and his guide were riding off in a westerly direction, the moon lighting up the way which for all abounded in dense shadows where the tall cacti threw them and where the trail was rough.

Mustang Merle could not help thinking over the events of the last hour.

He had been taken from prison without the knowledge of Joe Bundy, and was now on his way to what he had heard called "the underground trail." What was it, where was it situated, and whither did it lead?

Noland, as dark and almost as handsome as the man he served, did not offer any explanation as they rode along, and Merle resolved to keep his thoughts to himself and await developments.

He knew a good deal about the region through which they were riding, and had heard many wild stories connected with it, but he had never heard of the underground trail. There were "lost mines," plenty of them; but the tales connected with them were, for the most part, traditional, and he had heard them from many lips.

At last, with the moon setting for the night, they reached a place where Nature seemed to have had an upheaval at one time and Merle saw Noland loosen the revolvers he carried in his belt.

The following moment they were in dense darkness and the boy rancher felt that they had passed beneath the surface of the earth and were riding down a gentle incline into some unknown cavern.

"Is this the underground trail?" he ventured to ask.

"We have crossed the threshold of the Devil's Highway," was the answer in sepulchral tones. "We are under ground. This is what is called the Underground Trail."

"Where does it lead?"

"Heaven knows. We have never found out."

"But it has an outlet?"

"Of that no living mortal knows."

The horses' feet made no audible sound on the ground they trod. It seemed to be paved with dust.

On, on through the windings of that underground road went the boy rancher and his escort. The air was not bad, but seemed fresh all the time, and Merle felt that it came in from some opening, of the location of which he knew nothing.

All at once the young owner of Mesquite made a discovery that more than startled him. He had been in the strange road for more than an hour, and it was impossible to tell the amount of

ground traveled over, nor the thousand and one windings made by the steeds.

He asked Noland a question, to which there was no response. He put it again, but with the same result.

Then he put out his hand and touched the rope which had united the two steeds. Instead of being reasonably taut, it hung loose and seemed to trail on the path.

The horses were united no longer and, in fact, he was the only rider on that particular part of the underground highway.

In an instant the young owner of the ranch reined in his steed. He was in darkness almost palpable, and the air no longer was as fresh as it had been.

He had been deserted by Noland, of course, according to the command of Dolores Dick, and was the prisoner of the buried trail, as securely cooped up as if he were in the heart of one of the lost mines.

"This is demonism without a parallel," cried Merle, when he found his tongue. "I did not look for anything as desperate as this. In the name of Heaven, where am I, and how far underground have I been conducted to be abandoned?"

He examined every pocket for a match, but was not rewarded, and after some moments of thought he turned his steed about and endeavored to return over the trail. But vain was this attempt. He soon found that he could not rely on the horse to get him out of the place, and it seemed that every step but took him deeper and deeper into that underground *terra incognita* from which no human might hope to escape unguided.

Merle at last drew rein, and sat motionless but thoughtful in the saddle. He could not see his hand before his face; but could hear the sweep of unseen wings and now and then a sound like the shriek of some frightened bird.

Meantime, Noland had reached the open air and was galloping back toward Tarus City.

His horse, as if glad to get out of the dark place, was going like the wind, and his rider was smiling over the success of his venture.

"If the young chap finds his way out, he will deserve a golden medal," laughed Noland. "I don't see just why Dick wants him there, but he wishes him out of the way, I suppose. The boy is dangerous, for didn't he finish the career of Captain Cussed? I don't blame Captain Dick, for I wouldn't want him at large, especially when I had designs against his rich ranch."

The stars were pointing toward morning when Noland re-entered the home of the raiders.

He rode quietly to the stable and stabled his horse, then shaking off the dust of the Devil's Highway, walked toward Dolores Dick's house and struck the door with his bronze knuckles.

There was no answer, and presently Noland opened the portal and stepped inside.

What did he see?

On a low cot in one corner of the room lay a human figure, and the moment the raider leaned over it he fell back with a cry of astonishment.

The man was bound and gagged, and he was Dolores Dick himself!

"Great Caesar!" cried Noland, falling back.

"What has happened here?"

At that moment the eyes into which he was looking got an inquisitive stare, and the bandit, drawing his knife, cut the cords, and the raider-outlaw sprung up.

"Who did this?" asked Noland.

"Who but the coolest man in this region?" was the retort.

"Mondragon?"

"No, the lank Hercules of the ranch."

"Joe Bundy?"

"That very man!" cried Dick. "He has been here ever since daylight. He has seen Merle in prison, even visited him there. This is his work. He has the strength of a tiger and the quickness of a cat. I was thinking of him when all at once I was pounced upon and tied in a jiffy. Then came the gag which cut my mouth to pieces. What has happened?"

"I cannot tell you. I have just come back. The boy rancher is on the Devil's Highway."

Dolores Dick strode to the door and walked out. He almost ran to the Plaza, crossed it and rushed across the porch of the Golden Ace.

In another moment he was on the inside, helping himself to the hot liquor that burned his mangled mouth, and turning at last to confront the man who came rattling down-stairs, pistols in hand, to see who had invaded his hotel.

"The girl?" cried Dick.

"Up-stairs asleep."

"It is false! With what that cool Hercules has done there can be no Coral asleep in this house."

Pedron uttered a cry and vanished.

"I thought so," said Dolores Dick when he heard a cry of astonishment which proceeded from the upper part of the house.

"She isn't here; the room is unlocked and the bed—"

"Never mind. That settles it. This takes the rough riders of the border to Mesquite: this calls for the vengeance of Dolores Dick, and woe to the fortunes of the ranch owned by the boy cattle-king!"

He left the bar-room in a towering passion and the next moment Pedron knew that the denizens of Tarus were being aroused from their couches.

Old Joe had aroused a cage of tigers.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DROP OF A LASSO.

RIDING back over the trail which she had traversed in coming to the haunt of the handsome outlaw of the border, Coral Lemon could look into the homely face of Old Joe Bundy, the man whose cunning and daring had rescued her from the clutches of Dick the raider.

The old fellow had not quitted Tarus without discovering that it no longer held Merle, his young friend. He had found out that the boy rancher had been conducted out of town by a man supposed to be Dick himself, but, as the bandit had returned, he could not devise what had become of Merle.

Therefore, when he appeared suddenly to Dolores Dick in his own house and tied him before he could resist, he hoped to discover the truth about Merle's disappearance, but the outlaw had merely laughed at him, saying that that was a secret which death could not force from him.

"If harm comes to the boy that won't be a fool's vengeance, remember that," said Old Joe, bending over the prostrate man. "It will be something more than you dream of, for that boy is the apple of Joe Bundy's eye and when you touch it you touch him where his skin is tender," and the next moment he left the house with the captain of the raiders alone on his couch, bound and gagged so effectually that he could not sound the least alarm.

As yet Joe's identity was not known. He went from the outlaw's shanty to Pedron's Hotel.

When he emerged he had Coral with him, a singular look of gladness in the girl's deep eyes. They went across the Plaza together and toward the stables. When they left these in turn, both were mounted, and when near the outskirts of the bandit's haunt Coral again touched the old Yankee's arm.

"I wish we had Merle with us," she said.

"Don't I?" answered Joe. "But that is one of the secrets which I couldn't squeeze from Dolores Dick," and he looked away. "I'd like ter have him hyer myself, for this little escape of yours is going ter bring down upon Mesquite the hull shootin'-match, an' I'd like ter have Merle on the ground."

"But you won't give him up?"

"Wal, I should say not. Dick dropped one remark that set me ter thinkin' an' it will be the first thing I putter the Injin when we git back."

Not wishing to be too inquisitive, Coral made no reply but remained silent as they rode along.

Every now and then Old Joe would look back with an anxious cast of countenance as if he feared pursuit; but as the night lengthened without bringing to their ears the sound of hoofs, a smile of victory overspread his face and Coral's bright eyes sparkled.

All at once on the spur of a ridge Old Joe drew rein and listened.

Coral leaned forward and watched his face with intense interest.

"Something's down yonder an' it's comin' this way," said the Yankee in a whisper and Coral saw him move the Winchester which he knew so well how to use.

"I hear the horse movin' about, an' that's but one," he went on. "I think it's comin' this way; but that it stops an' I think I know exactly whar it is. Say, Coral, would you be afraid ter stay hyer till I see who's down yonder?"

At the same time Old Joe thrust a revolver into her hand and the detective's daughter promised to keep the spot where they had halted until his return and saw him ride off disappearing like a shadow.

Old Joe rode a little distance from Coral and then dropped to the ground.

The night was just dark enough to be deceptive and he could not see very far ahead. He crept forward and now and then halted to

see what was there, all the time playing cat with the agility displayed by that animal.

Suddenly the old scout arose and stood erect.

There was something dark not far away and he could make it out by comparing it with the ground which was bare of grass at that point.

The Winchester of the girl's rescuer was at his shoulder and his eye was glancing over the barrel when the object sprung up and straightened in the starlight.

"Wal, I'll swan!" cried Joe, lowering the weapon and then giving vent to a sound, at which the object looked toward him and then ran up.

Old Joe reached out his skeleton hand and grasped the red one that was extended.

"Shake!" he said. "You're just the chap I want ter see, Red Hawk. War you comin' ter look after me?"

The eyes of the young Indian for a moment sparkled with merriment. "Red Hawk thought Joe could take care of himself," he said. "But he wanted to see how fared Merle, and the girl who wants the scar removed from her face."

"I've got her over yonder; but the boy is missin'."

"What, isn't Mustang Merle in the camp of the border tigers?" cried the young Apache.

Joe led Red Hawk toward where Coral awaited him, and all the time talked rapidly and in an undertone.

Suddenly the Indian broke from Joe's side, and falling back threw his hand to his forehead.

"What did Dolores Dick say?" he exclaimed. "What was it about the buried path? Tell Red Hawk again, Joe."

"He said that if we wanted ter find Merle we should look along 'the buried path.'"

The Indian did not move, but stood like a statue in the night.

"Captain Joe, there was a legend a long time ago with my people and the tribes on the South, which would be in this very country, that there was a road which led into the land of the underground demons who sent disease and death among the red-men. I used to know this tradition by heart."

"But it may not have been a tradition," said Joe who was watching the Indian closely. "If there is a buried pathway why not one known to Dolores Dick?"

"Who took Merle from the camp?"

"Dick."

"But he come back soon?"

"Yes. He must have turned him over to a guide."

"Red Hawk must know. He must find out who took Merle after Dick came back."

"But—"

"Red Hawk has been among enemies before and he knows when to be on the alert. You are going back. Take the young lady home to her father and prepare for the bandits of the border. Red Hawk is going on."

"In search of the buried path?"

The Indian nodded.

"Whar's yer horse?"

The hand of the Apache pointed away toward the west and Joe, looking in that direction, failed to discover anything that looked like an animal.

A minute later Red Hawk held out his hand and it was seized by the Yankee's.

The grasp was long and fervent, and when the two stepped apart they walked in opposite directions.

Red Hawk moved on until he found a horse cropping the short grass of the plain and in an instant he was on his back and riding toward the haunt of the border raiders.

But he was not permitted to reach the town, for all at once he caught the sound of hoofs and in a moment something giant-like loomed up between him and the stars, and Red Hawk lay quiet along his steed and watched it.

A horse and his rider!

Nearer and nearer to the Indian came the stranger.

Red Hawk slipped to the ground and crouched behind a clump of pines, but with something snake-like in his hands.

In a little while a whinny came from his own horse whereupon the rider watched so closely drew rein and looked in that direction.

"What, has one of the horses given out?" Red Hawk heard him say. "I may come up with them if this is the case," and he came toward the riderless steed which was looking at him with curiosity, head thrown forward and all expectant.

Not a muscle of the young Indian moved. He crouched in the dark shadow of the cactus clump and fingered the object he held in his red hands.

Suddenly something leaped up from the ground and hurtled through the air. It went toward the unknown like a flying serpent and coming down over his head tightened there, pinioning his arms to his side and drawing from him a quick, mad oath.

The following moment he was jerked from the saddle and stood on the ground, the young red-skin's captive.

Red Hawk for a minute looked at his work and then moved toward his prisoner. He circled about him and by and by came up.

"I thought it was you!" growled the lassoed man. "The moment I felt the loop tighten I thought of you and wished I had my hand at your throat."

The Indian made no reply, but stopped in front of the netted one and grinned. He saw the wide-rimmed hat with its snake-skin band, the sash that encircled the body, the belt containing two revolvers which the pinioned hands could not use and last but not least the high-topped boots which proclaimed the identity of their owner.

"Where is the young master?" said Red Hawk when he spoke again.

"How should I know?" was the retort.

"You know. You sent him off with one of your men. You have sent him to the hidden trail which is under ground. You will not tell Red Hawk? Mebbe you will tell the man-hunter of Uncle Sam."

Red Hawk coolly turned and signaled to his horse which came up, and in a second he had made one end of the lasso fast to the strong saddle.

"Captain Dick, you are going to the ranch sooner than you expected. You are going to stand face to face with the man-hunter. You will reveal all you know about the buried path, or you will never lead another raid," and Red Hawk without more ado vaulted upon his horse.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DUEL AT MESQUITE.

DOLORES DICK stood beneath the roof of Mesquite Ranch, but not as a successful raider.

He stood in the parlor alone, with his hands bound on his back, but his figure was as straight as an arrow, and but for the cords that told the story of captivity, no one would have thought that he was not the ruling spirit of the place.

The cunning of Red Hawk, the young Apache, had outwitted him; the lasso had found him on the plain, and, settling down over his head, had made him the red-skin's prisoner, and he was watched like a hawk by those who knew his value.

The sun was sinking, a golden disk in the western heavens, and the long shadows of trees and house were falling on the grass around the ranch.

To all appearances the bandit of the border was not seen at all by any one, but at the same time a man who was not noticed by him was looking on while he stood erect in the room, smiling now and then as he tried his bonds only to discover that the agile hands of Red Hawk had tied them well.

Presently a door at one side of the room opened and the prisoner of the ranch turned to greet the man who came in.

It was Lemon, the detective.

"If you come for the secret, let us not waste words," said the bandit before Lemon could address him. "I have nothing to reveal, and as you boast of having sharp-eyed friends, why don't you wait till they report?"

The detective waved his hand toward the door.

"I have come not for the secret of Mustang Merle's disappearance, but in the interest of a matter just as near my heart. Why don't you speak the word that will remove that accursed brand from the face of my daughter?" he demanded.

"And die afterward by the rope of the men of this very ranch?"

Lemon colored.

"Captain Dick Nellis—I call you by the name best known to me, for I knew not the name of Dolores Dick until I entered this region—you may die if you permit that mark to remain on her cheek. You possess the secret of that brand; the man who ordered it placed there, if, indeed, he did not do the deed himself, knows how it can be removed."

A smile wreathed the handsome face of Dolores Dick.

"And why should I tell you? Would that be getting even with you, Paul Lemon? I recollect how you hunted us down without mercy—how you drove me from my old grounds and forced me to become what you see me—a free lance of

the border. Why, that very mark will make your child a noted person. There are not many people who carry with them the brand of the triangle."

A mad imprecation broke over the angered father's lips.

He started toward the bandit, but suddenly recollecting that he was bound, stopped and fell back.

The raider-outlaw did not quail, but looked him in the eye, and even smiled again.

"Are we alone?" asked Dolores Dick.

"Yes."

The next moment the bandit strode across the room to Lemon, toward whom he leaned.

"They say you are a brave man, Captain Lemon," he went on. "I have heard that you know not fear. I hate you—hate you cordially. Come; I will make a bargain with you. You want the brand removed from the cheek of your child. I don't blame you. It spoils her beauty, that's a fact. I will tell you how to make her cheek as beautiful as ever—I will give up the secret if you will fight me."

Lemon seemed to recoil, and the next moment he was looking at the stalwart bandit with an eager expression.

"You are not my prisoner," he said.

"I am as much yours as theirs," was the quick reply. "I don't believe that you want the brand removed. I believe that you are willing to see it mar Coral's face, because that would prevent her from getting a husband who might not find favor in your eyes."

"That is false! I want the brand removed!"

"Then, accept my proposition. If you conquer me you shall have the secret."

"If you win, what?"

"The secret remains mine, of course."

Lemon felt the hot blood of desire coursing through his veins. He saw in the person of the man before him the rascal who had caused him to retire from the Secret Service of the Government in disgrace; he beheld in Dolores Dick the man who had marked Coral for life unless he chose to give up the secret of the brand.

He went to the door before he answered Dolores Dick.

The house, for the earliness of the hour, was still. The sun had gone down, and the herdsmen were discussing Merle's disappearance among the stables. He wondered where Joe Bundy was, but Red Hawk, he knew, had ridden off on his steed with a determined look in his eye, as if he had secretly resolved to find the underground trail, or perish in the attempt.

While he inspected the immediate surroundings of the room, the eye of Dolores Dick was upon him.

It was not hard to tell what was passing in the bandit's heart.

"Captain Lemon, with all your boasted courage, you are afraid to fight your old prey," came over the raider's lips.

In an instant the man-hunter turned and came forward with the eagerness of a panther.

"Where shall we fight?" he cried.

"Why not here?" answered Dick. "What better place than this for our battle? The house is still and the fight need not last long."

"Then let it be here!"

The two men stood face to face. The lamp had been lighted some time and threw a ghostly light over the scene.

"I have been looking at those swords yonder," said Dolores Dick, turning toward a shelf of weapons that was to be seen on one side of the room. "I don't know much about such weapons, but I am willing to take my chances with them."

Lemon crossed over to the rack and took down two elegant straight swords, which Merle had purchased for fencing some years before. They had never been used in a duel, and the boy rancher, though skilled in their use, had never tried to draw blood with the finely-tempered blades.

There was a flash in Lemon's eyes when he bore the swords back to Dolores Dick.

"Ah, I forgot your bonds," he said, running one of the blades between the bandit's wrists. "You can handle the weapon now," and the man of the border took hold of one of the swords and began to cut the air about him.

"If you win, the secret is yours, for I carry on my person the antidote for the triad mark," whispered Dick. "If you lose she will wear until she dies the brand of the border. We thoroughly understand one another. Now let's get at it."

The men fell apart, and stood face to face with a few feet between them.

"Ready?" asked Dolores Dick.

Lemon guarded and echoed:

"Ready!"

Then followed some swift passes during which the blades crossed and parried; strokes were adroitly avoided, and some fierce thrusts given, all of which showed that both men were in terrible earnest.

"He lied to me," thought Lemon. "He said he knew nothing about the sword, yet he handles it with the coolness and dexterity of an expert. If I don't finish him soon I shall be weakened down and find myself at his mercy. He is trying to play me out," and Lemon made a hot thrust at the bandit's throat to see the stroke turned aside and his own blade twisted from his hand and thrown to one side of the room.

With a cry of rage the detective sprung after his flying blade, caught it up and turned toward his antagonist almost before Dolores Dick could take in his movement.

"You haven't lost the cat-like agility you displayed that night in the Crescent City," smiled the bandit. "I begin to believe that you want the brand removed from Coral's cheek, but it shall remain where it is!"

The next instant the handsome rider of the border executed a thrust which threw Lemon off his guard for the tenth of a second, but that was long enough for the bandit's plans.

Before the detective could recover he found the point of the raider's weapon against his breast; there was fire in the gleaming eyes back of the hilt, and no sign of mercy anywhere.

"It is mine to keep!" came over the lips of the border bandit. "It is mine forever and your child will wear till she dies the brand of Dolores Dick, the Outlaw of Southwest."

Lemon tried to recover the ground so suddenly lost by a trick; but in vain. The eyes flashed again, the point of the weapon came closer, and then—darkness and a fall, with the light vanishing as if covered with a blanket!

Dolores Dick looked down at the body lying at his feet and then toward the door. Still holding the sword, he crossed the room and looked out.

He was free to quit the house. He passed out upon the porch and stopped there for a moment, listening to the sounds that came up from toward the cattle-yards.

"I will come back before long, but not alone," said he. "I have not left Mesquite for good. Hold! I should leave a farewell."

He went back into the house, strode to the table and wrote upon a sheet of paper lying there, one sentence, at which he looked and smiled:

"The brand will trouble him no more!"
"CAPTAIN DICK."

The following moment he was on the porch again. He sprung down with the lightness of a cat and was moving away in the night.

"A short captivity and a lively one. He thought I didn't know anything about the sword, ha, ha!" and the laugh died away on the summer air and Dolores Dick passed out of sight—free once more.

CHAPTER XV.

ADVENTURES UNDERGROUND.

THE boy rancher of Mesquite leading his horse through the gloom of the underground trail was a sight seen by no mortal eye.

The tread of the animal was heard now and then where the dust was not thick on the Devil's Highway and where the hoofs of the steed struck a stone from which would leap up a flash of fire.

Mustang Merle soon discovered that the place was a perfect labyrinth of darkness.

He groped his way down the narrow corridors or stood undecided in some chamber, the dimensions of which he could not see, fearful lest an advance would hurl him into some terrible pit, for the road seemed to fork like other roads, but no one could tell where the forks led.

A dozen times had he tried to get back to the mouth of the underground pathway, but each time he had failed.

It is no wonder that Merle at last stood in the gloom almost without hope and nearly ready to give up.

All at once a rock falling somewhere in the darkness startled the horse, and jerking back he tore the lines from the young rancher's grip and Merle was friendless amid the Stygian gloom.

"I will follow the main road as near as I can," said he, addressing himself. "The walls ought to guide me and I know what it is to feel my way in the dark."

Once more he started, pressing on and on, feeling the walls of the buried road as he ad-

vanced. It was like the blind groping in an unfamiliar room.

Merle did not let anything discourage him now. He pressed on until at last he brought up against a solid wall of rock which gave out no hollow sound when he smote it with a stone.

The boy owner of the best ranch on the border stopped and leaned against the barrier.

Nothing but rock ahead!

"Am I to perish here at the hand of Dolores Dick, my old enemy?" he cried. "Is this to be the end of the feud between us?"

His words went round the wall in the gloom and came back with a hundred fantastic echoes.

Suddenly Merle fell against the stone and applied his ear to the hardened surface.

"I heard a sound which was not an echo," he said. "I cannot have been deceived. I thought it sounded like a human voice, but it was not this side of the wall."

Silent seconds flew by on leaden wings while he listened for a repetition of the noise, but he seemed doomed to disappointment.

He was on the eve of giving up when the wall appeared to shake as if in the grasp of an earthquake and Merle was thrown back and off his feet.

He scrambled up as soon as possible and stood erect with a feeling of pain all over. He had been hurled violently against the rocks and stunned.

"It was an earthquake!" cried the young rancher, putting out his hand and feeling a vast crack in the wall.

But he drew back from entering the opening. He stood undecided and filled with an undefinable fear, not that he had a drop of coward blood in his veins, for he had not; but the unknown was before him.

"It can not make matters worse," said Merle. "Why not go ahead and see the end of this adventure? The earthquake may have befriended me; who knows?"

He plunged into the opening and pushed on once more. He could feel the wall on either side, the rough edges telling him that it had been split by the convulsion, and the floor was strewn with small stones, some of which were sharp, like pieces of flint.

The Devil's Highway had received a new addition and the boy rancher was exploring it.

Suddenly he almost fell against the wall at his right for a voice had thrilled him.

"That shock was enough to have killed a thousand men. The wonder is that we exist."

The young rancher heard every word and, what was more, they seemed to emanate from a spot very near.

"Let's get out of this. I don't explore any more underground roads; this one is quite enough to last me all my life. Shall we go, Noland?"

Noland! How the name startled Mustang Merle! It was the name of the man who had brought him to the hidden path at Dolores Dick's command. Hours had passed since his arrival. Had the man come back to look for him?

A minute's silence followed the last words.

"I would like to know what became of him after I went away," was the reply. "If the shock didn't finish him I would like to see how frightened he is. We came here to find the young herder of the valley, Jason."

"True, but what's the use of getting shaken to death by earthquake while looking for him?"

"We'll go back and begin where we left off awhile ago."

"And if we don't strike the trail soon, we will go out altogether, eh?"

"We will."

The voices died away in a manner which showed that the speakers were moving off and Merle listened till he could hear them no longer.

"Hunted yet," he said. "Those men, members of Dolores Dick's band, are looking for me. Why? A wolf never tracks one for good. The vulture never hovers over the hare because it loves it."

He did not move again until he had regained his breath and then went forward cautiously. Now he heard the sound of waters. Once before he thought he heard the rush of unseen tides, but now there was no mistake. There was an underground river as well as a hidden road, and why not? The Southwest is a land of wonders—a land but half explored.

The path leading toward the river was followed by Mustang Merle. He had the sound of water all the time in his ears, but the footsteps of the two men had died away, and he was once more the sole traveler through that land of buried darkness.

He stopped at last—so suddenly that a hand

seemed to have touched him, and falling back against the wall at his side, he looked at what he now saw, for a light had flashed in his face and it was no longer night.

Merle stared at the specters that were revealed by the light, himself standing boldly in its glare, and knew that to move would be to invite discovery.

There they stood, the stalwarts of Tarus City, Noland, his old guide, holding the torch which had flashed up so suddenly, and his companion as tall and Herculean as he. Merle could not help admiring the admirable physique of the twain, and was looking at this when an event occurred for which he was totally unprepared.

"The water of this accursed river has changed color since the earthquake," suddenly exclaimed Noland's companion.

"Nonsense. It always was dark."

"But it is black now. Look!"

The bronze hand of the speaker pointed toward the water and Noland stepped forward with his torch.

The next moment he was stooping over the very edge of the bank, and the light was falling on the silent waves.

Quick as a flash the other sprung forward.

Merle saw him throw up his strong arms and all at once Noland was seized with a grip of iron.

Merle hugged the wall as the torch fell from Noland's hand and rolled to his very feet where it flared up, painting his shadow against the gray stone.

The two men were struggling for the mastery on the brink of the lost river, Noland laboring under the disadvantage of being wickedly attacked, but he was making a desperate battle for life. Back and forth swayed the two men above the water. Merle held his breath and watched the contest.

It could not last long. The ground had already grown slippery and several times they had gone to their knees.

All at once Noland fell to the very edge of the silent tide. His enemy tried to throw him off and land him in the stream, but the last grip of the stalwart guide was the grip of death.

Noland fell back, pulling after him the man who wanted his life. He touched the water; his body was half submerged and the hand at his throat was trying to choke out the last desperate particle of life that remained.

"No, you go with me, Black Jason!" said Noland, breaking loose from the grasping hand at the last moment. "You have played the last card in the deck, but the hand of Noland baffles you. Come! the fishes of the lost river want a feast."

One more terrible struggle in the rushing tide, and the two men vanished.

Mustang Merle saw the hand of Noland disappear, he caught a last glimpse of the face revealed by the light of the lost torch—a face seamed with triumph, despite its hard, dark lines; and then the river swallowed up the two foes, and he saw them no more.

The young owner of Mesquite stood awhile longer before he moved from the spot from which he had witnessed the underground tragedy.

He picked up the torch and whirled it around his head to increase its blaze, then, with hope suddenly renewed, started off again.

If the earthquake had opened a road for him, why should not the torch of the bandits show him where it led?

He pushed back over the route which he had traveled to the spot. He lit his way by the flare of the friendly fire, and some time later—he could not count time in that strange place—he was startled to hear a voice at sound of which he fell back and held his breath.

"Halt! In the name of the dead, stand where you are! To advance another step is death!"

Merle stood like a statue and waited.

"Look at your feet!"

The young ranch king swept the torch past his boots.

He uttered a cry of genuine horror.

He stood on the very fringe of a yawning crevice, the depths of which no light could reveal.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LIFE SECRET.

THE chasm was not very wide, but it was deep. Mustang Merle could not send the light of his torch into its dark depths, and he soon gave up.

When he straightened and threw its glare across the crevice, he saw the figure of his best friend, Red Hawk, the young Apache.

"Let Merle hold his torch so that it will not

blind the young warrior of the Apache," said Red Hawk.

"What are you going to do?"

"Red Hawk intends to join his young brother."

"You don't expect to leap the chasm?" cried Merle, in horror.

"Merle forgets that Red Hawk can jump like the deer. He has taken the best prizes of the jumping-matches among his people, and his limbs are not stiff."

The Indian youth drew off and gathered his powers for the wonderful leap. Merle held the light as directed, and Red Hawk came bounding toward the cleft in the path.

All at once he sprung from the ground, and was in mid-air. The following moment he alighted at Merle's feet and looked up into his face with a laugh of victory.

Red Hawk had cleared the yawning space, and had alighted safely on the further side.

"Now back!" cried the Indian, seizing Merle's arm. "We must go back to the ranch. Dolores Dick is there."

"On my ranch!" cried the boy rancher.

"Yes, but he is a prisoner."

"Who took him?"

"The lasso of Red Hawk fell over his head, and he went along with the young Apache."

"Red Hawk, you are worth your weight in gold," and Merle grasped the red-skin's hand. "Of course I am ready to go back. I long to see this outlaw at Mesquite."

While they were threading the mazes of the underground trail, Red Hawk related his adventures since seeing Merle; he told how Joe Bundy had rescued Coral from Tarus City, and how the capture of Dolores Dick was effected. In return Merle told how he had been conducted to the subterranean road and its dark horrors; how he had witnessed the battle between Noland and Jason, and how, finally, with the torch in hand, he had fled from the scene until, finding him (Red Hawk) on the brink of the cleft in the pathway, he had been miraculously saved from a terrible fate.

The horse which had borne Merle to the hidden scenes had escaped in some manner from the place, and was found on the outside, where it was secured by the Indian, and in a short time they were riding over the ground toward Mesquite.

Merle was anxious to stand face to face with his old foe. He asked Red Hawk many questions concerning Dick, thus evincing his eagerness, and when they came in sight of Mesquite he gave his horse the spur, and distanced his red friend.

Merle's unexpected return was hailed with loud acclaim by those who witnessed it, and the first to run out and seize his hand was Joe Bundy.

"How's the captive?" eagerly questioned Merle.

"As happy as a sunflower, I guess; at least I would be if I were in his boots."

"Why, what has happened, Joe?"

"We haven't got him any longer."

"You don't mean that you have tried him, and—"

"No, he played the very last hand we expected him to play, and Lemon in the house will tell you the rest."

Merle dismounted and rushed into the ranch-house, where he was met by Coral, who, white-faced, awaited him.

There and then he learned from the lips of the detective all about the duel with the handsome raider of the border. As he looked down into the speaker's face, and saw how badly wounded he was, he inwardly resolved to carry the war into the enemy's country at once, and pay him back once for all for the work of the past, and thus end forever the feud that existed.

Lemon's escape from death had been miraculous. The sword wielded by the skillful hand of Dolores Dick, had missed the heart by a hair, and the wonder was that he was still alive.

After thanking Old Joe for his rescue of Coral, Merle left the house and found Mondragon at his heels.

"May I go with you?" asked the man.

"Certainly," was the prompt reply. "What have you against Dolores Dick?"

"I hate the scoundrel with all my heart. Years ago I was a happy man, had as pretty a little ranch as ever shone in the sun. But in a night it was plundered by this very man, and I awoke to find the labor of years destroyed. But this was not all. My wife died shortly afterward, and my little daughter was stolen by some one. I believe Dolores Dick knows the secret of her disappearance. I want to force the truth from him."

"Why didn't you confront him when he was a prisoner here?"

"I did, but he would not tell me."

"Well, Mondragon, you shall go with us."

Night once more was settling down over the lovely scene in the valley of which Mesquite was the gem, when twenty horsemen rode from the ranch and took the trail across the country.

Enough had been left behind to guard the place, but Merle had selected from among them all the trustiest and bravest—men ready to follow his lead anywhere, and glad of the opportunity to strike a blow for their master even in the camp of their foe.

But let us precede this little band of avengers. Let us outstrip them and enter the haunt of the bandits of the Tagus, and see what they are at.

The escaped raider of the border had returned. Mounted on one of the best steeds on the ranch, Dolores Dick had ridden into Tarus City, waving his hat in triumph and shouting over his return.

It was a proud moment for him when he alighted in front of Pedron's hotel and confronted the crowd of rough, but handsome, long-haired fellows who swarmed around him, eager to hear the wonderful story of his adventures, and Dick was not loth to tell them all.

They could not believe that he had been to Mesquite Ranch—that he had even stood bound under the boy rancher's roof. But as he told in glowing language the whole story, describing the sword duel with his old enemy, the detective, they broke out in wild cheers, and the air seemed full of hats.

At the conclusion of his narrative, Dolores Dick took Noland to one side, and said:

"Noland, I want the boy back. You must go and bring him from the Devil's Highway. I intend to escort him home."

Noland looked at the bandit with an expression of amazement.

"Take Jason with you," continued Dick. "You two will certainly find him. Don't come back without him. We shall not move till you return."

With Noland every word uttered by his master was law, and in a short time he and Jason were in the saddle and on the way toward the underground trail.

What happened to the messenger we have already seen. The lost river bore their corpses away on the dark tide, and their hunt for Merle ended in death.

Dolores Dick, waiting for his men, was not idle.

He had every weapon inspected and the equipment of every steed in the "city" was carefully looked after.

All at once he appeared at the door of Inez's home.

"Are you willing to give up the secret of the lost mine?" he asked.

"I know nothing that will benefit you. You overrate the secret I carry in my bosom."

Dolores Dick drew his figure up and folded his arms.

"I am willing to trade with you, Inez," he said, with a smile.

"What have you to offer?"

"A secret as great as yours."

The fair girl started.

In another instant she had bounded forward and was looking up into the bandit's face with scarcely any color in her own.

"It is about my parentage?" she cried.

"What an excellent guesser you are," answered the bandit. "Well, you won't trade now, I suppose?"

Inez fell back, still pale.

"That has been my desire ever since I came here," she said. "I have yearned to know who I am. I may yet know a mother's love, and—"

"Don't set your thoughts too high," broke in the bandit. "I would not raise them to too high a pitch. What say you, girl?"

"All I know is yours!" she replied.

A smile broke over the face of the bandit of the border.

"Produce the diagram which you once told me was given to you in the mountain by an old man."

"And in return for it you will give me—what?"

"The secret of your parentage."

Trembling with excitement, Inez crossed the room and stooped at the head of her little couch.

She remained there a moment, then arose and came back, holding in her hand a bit of discolored paper which she opened in the bandit's presence.

Dolores Dick took the paper and went to the light. One look and a cry escaped his lips.

"Some men are fools and know it not," said he, looking at Inez. "Girl, did you ever hear of Rush Mondragon?"

She gave him a singular look.

"The name is a strange one to me," she replied.

"That is your name. Your father lives; but your mother—"

"My mother?"

"She is dead," and without more ado, but clutching the paper as though it was too precious to lose, the captain of the border bandits stalked from the room, leaving Inez alone with the newly-discovered secret of her life.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RANCHER'S SWOOP.

HOURS passed, but Noland and his companion did not come.

Dolores Dick, almost tired of waiting, was wondering what kept the men sent out to rescue Mustang Merle from the depths of the Devil's Highway. He looked toward the concealed trail, and every now and then walked to the end of the camp and strained his eyes as the shadows of another night deepened and his own became mingled with those of cactus and bush.

Within the hotel a scene of usual revelry was going on. Pedron was in merry mood, and the men of Tarus, flush with few exceptions, were consuming his liquors, or telling stories of plundered ranches and well-hoofed trails.

Down the trail lying out under the stars rode a band which sent forth but few sounds.

Nearer and nearer to Tarus City it came, the members of it riding close together and their steeds under excellent control, for not a whinny cleft the night as they came on, speaking not, or in whispers when compelled to open their mouths.

After awhile the riders disappeared among the hills that looked down upon Tarus from the west, and the night swallowed them up.

By and by two figures appeared in the streets of the bandits' town and separated, as if by agreement.

One was tall and angular, the other smaller, but with the tread of a cat.

The taller of the pair crept toward the hotel and coolly took a survey of what was going on inside from the Plaza. This was not difficult for the night was warm and the doors all open, and the keen eyes of the prowler could see the crowd of toughs in the place and hear the tales they told.

Presently there crossed the porch the form of a man at sight of whom the watcher crouched against the post whose shadow sheltered him.

"At home once more!" said the man in the Plaza. "The tiger of Tarus is among his kind and so are we."

In another moment the same form emerged from the house accompanied by two men who walked close beside him.

"I won't strike the blow till I have the boy with me," said the man so well watched by the croucher. "Noland and Jason have not returned. You know the trail to the Underground Road?"

The two men looked at him and grumbled.

"What, are you going to send us to that haunted highway?" one cried.

"I am."

The hand of the speaker glided toward his hip and he spoke in commanding voice.

"All you have to do is to keep to the right after entering the mouth," he went on. "The labyrinth is not so dangerous if one keeps his head. As to it's being haunted, pish!"

"If Noland and Jason have not returned, why send us out to perish in the same manner?"

"You are cowards! You don't want to serve me only when there is spoil to be divided without work."

The twain saw the something that glittered in the starlight in the half lifted hand of Dolores Dick, and one hastened to say:

"We will go. We will bring the boy rancher back from the hidden road, ghosts or no ghosts."

"Go, then. The sooner you return the sooner the gold of Mesquite rolls into our coffers."

Dolores Dick turned away with a laugh and for a moment watched the figures which glided off.

"The needle is not in the haystack," said the man crouching at the Plaza post. "The boy king of Mesquite is nearer than you think, Captain Dick," and he saw the tall figure of the bandit of the border stalk back toward his own shanty.

Dolores Dick shut the door behind him and lit a lamp. Setting this on the rough table in the center of the apartment, he took from one corner an iron box, the contents of which he poured out in front of him.

"The strangest thing of all is that the girl, Inez, should have the diagram of the lost mine, and that that mine should be connected with the Devil's Highway. I will look over these documents till Wizard Wool comes, when he will give me the use of his head, and together we ought to solve the mystery."

The captain of the border raiders spoke aloud and then fell to assorting the papers before him.

He was suddenly interrupted at this task by the opening of the door and the man called Wizard Wool appeared.

"On time," smiled Dolores Dick, looking up. "Here is work for both of us till my hunters come back."

The gray-bearded wizard of Tarus took a stool near his master and pulled a lot of papers toward him.

At that very moment the door opened once more.

Dolores Dick and his companion turned their heads.

"Keep yer seats, gentlemen," said the man who had slipped into the room and whose outstretched hands gripped two enormous six-shooters. "I don't want ter disturb your task, but the fact is, I have some business of an interrupting nature and—"

A mad oath from the tongue of Dolores Dick cut in twain the sentence of the new-comer and caused him to smile.

"I didn't think it necessary to send in my card," he went on. "In fact, I haven't had any printed for so long that I got tired o' carryin' 'em."

It was Old Joe Bundy as large as life, with a latent gleam in his black eye and a grin at the corners of his mouth.

Dolores Dick pushed back his stool and made a motion to get up; but the revolver of Old Joe, dropping a trifle, seemed to alter his resolution.

"I don't want ter hurt any one—I'm tender-hearted, you know, like the bull Bundy family; but if you should git up and my hand should become nervous, why, that's no tellin' what might happen," continued Joe. "So, in my humble judgment, it's best ter sit still."

Wizard Wool, still staring at the cool man near the door, slipped one of his hands across the table and clutched some of the papers.

"Hands off!" cried Bundy. "Them papers may be of value to some one besides yerself an' I advise ye ter let 'em alone."

The hand of the wizard crept back.

"We're hyer in force this time."

"You are?"

"Yes. The boys are hevin' a fine time at Pedron's."

There was no answer. The tones of Old Joe were tantalizing, and Dolores Dick was in no humor for joking.

"You missed the heart you aimed at—missed it by an inch," said Joe. "He's going ter get well an' says he'll live ter settle some old scores."

The handsome bandit struck the table with his fist.

"I won't deny that I tried to slay him," he cried. "I aimed at the heart."

"Thar's no doubt of that. But Coral will bring him through an' when she loses her scar—"

"But she will never lose that!"

"Oh, yes, she will!" laughed Old Joe.

The wizard of Tarus looked at his master and frowned.

"I didn't come hyer ter talk all night," suddenly resumed the tall old scout. "The rest of the boys are waitin' for you."

"For us!" exclaimed Dolores Dick.

"Why not? That's why we came."

The bandit, taken so completely unawares, was on his feet and his splendid figure equaled Old Joe's in height.

"Pistols to the floor!" commanded the Yankee. "Take 'em out an' drop 'em softly."

Both Dolores Dick and Wizard Wool obeyed, and four revolvers fell to the floor, where they lay in the lamp-light.

Joe Bundy now threw open the door of the shanty and ordered the prisoners to march.

"Never mind the papers on the table; they'll be attended to," said Joe. "To the victors belong the spoils. Forward now! Not a signal to yer men, or the gates of death will open for you both."

Out into the starlight marched Dolores Dick and his right bower, the all-knowing man of Tarus City. They had not advanced far when half a dozen forms rose from the ground and they were in the midst of some of the boy rancher's men.

Dolores Dick fell back from before them and for a moment found himself free.

"Not a word," hoarsely cried Old Joe: but he had spoken too late.

The next instant there arose from the bandit's throat a peculiar cry which sounded far and wide, and at sound of it every man in Pedron's hostelry sprung up and rushed upon the porch.

The shout was still on Dick's lips when he was pounced upon by Old Joe and borne back, the hands of the Yankee spy at his throat.

"Spare him, Joe," and a hand clutched the old man's arm.

"I will for you, Captain Merle," and still holding the outlaw, Joe turned to the young speaker, at whom Captain Dolores was intently looking.

"Great Heavens! when did you come up out of the buried road?" he cried—words he could not have kept back, try as he might.

But, instead of answering Dolores Dick, Merle had other work to do. The bandits had swarmed out of the hotel and the dens of Tarus like a hive of bees. They were running in every direction, with weapons in their hands, seeking the enemy whose coming the signal had proclaimed.

In a little time the Plaza seemed to swarm with the bandits of the border.

"Let them have it now—just one volley," commanded Merle.

The next moment came the volley, and from the leaden rain of the deadly Winchester the scourges of the Southwest fell back or pitched in every direction.

Mustang Merle had carried the war "into Africa."

CHAPTER XVIII.

RED HAWK'S SNAP SHOT.

THE volley fired by the avenging ranchers seemed to paralyze the bandits of Tarus.

They knew that the men of Mesquite had come to avenge the past and to show their leader that he had lorded it over the border long enough.

Dolores Dick saw his followers tumbling in all directions, and heard the whistling of bullets.

Near him, with the eye of an eagle in his head, stood the man he most feared—Joe Bundy, the lank Yankee scout. The old man watched the bandit leader as though he more than half expected to see him make a break for liberty.

All at once, with the quickness of a tiger-cat, the scourge of the border turned upon Joe and the next moment had placed him between his own body and the rifles of the guard.

Joe was completely in the power of the bandit captain, but this did not prevent him from calling out:

"Don't mine me, boys, but shoot the varmint down. A bullet will go through the last of the Bundys and find Dolores Dick."

Of course not a weapon was lifted for none wanted to injure the old scout, and Dick, seeing this, took further advantage of his trick, and keeping Joe between him and the enemy, was off before he could be surrounded.

Mustang Merle witnessed this play with his heart in his throat.

He could not realize that the very man he was after—the vulture of the Southwest—had escaped him after all his play; but the absence of Dolores Dick from the spot told him that it was true.

Meantime Joe Bundy had been dragged from the scene of the turning of the tables by main strength.

"See here," he said at last, or when he caught his breath. "You don't want to extirminate the Bundy family, do you?"

"Why not? What is your family but a poor lot—a collection of cowards?"

Old Joe's eye fairly flashed.

He was the prisoner of the very man whom he had faced a short time before in the heart of his stamping-ground, and now he could look into the muzzle of a revolver about whose butt twined the cool fingers of Captain Dick.

Dolores Dick forced his prisoner to the other side of the camp, where he halted and turned upon him.

"You know what has just happened?" the bandit said. "My men have fallen before the rifles of the boy's companions. Theirs is a mission of vengeance, and they expect to ride back to report the annihilation of the men of the border. You are going with us. You are my prisoner, and though I am, for the present, almost defenseless, I may show your young friend and master that Dolores Dick is still able to take care of himself."

Still covered by the deadly weapon Joe was taken to a stable where two horses were found.

The animals were led forth and the long Yankee forced to mount one.

In another instant he was alongside of Dolores Dick who, looking toward the Plaza, hesitated to ride off without sending some shots into the ranks of Mustang Merle's men.

"Some other time," Joe heard him mutter. "I am still at large and one of these days will pay them back for this night's work. They came down upon me like a pack of wolves, but I will return the compliment."

The two steeds started off and the bandit, watching old Joe like a hawk, kept close to his side.

In vain did Joe watch for an opportunity to make a bold break for liberty. He had resolved to turn the tables on the bandit captain as soon as he could and thus escape from the death to which as he could see he was being taken by his foe.

It was more than likely, as Joe Bundy knew, that Dick had some more secret hiding places as terrible as the one from which Mustang Merle had escaped.

"I don't like the idea of being left underground," said the captive to himself. "I've had some experience in that line and it wasn't very pleasant."

Suddenly Dolores Dick turned upon his prisoner.

"Do you think the girl will ever take a fancy to me?" he asked.

"Coral? Wal, I rather guess not," was the quick rejoinder accompanied by a smile.

"She's pretty."

"A reg'lar beauty," said Joe.

"But her father never liked me."

"I should think not. But you needn't look for Coral to take to a man like you, seeing what you have done."

Old Joe saw the bandit king look away and smile to himself.

A few minutes later Dolores Dick looked back and appeared to listen.

"They will make nothing by following me," he said with a mad glance at his prisoner.

The heart of the last of the Bundys took a great leap in his bosom.

As yet the old scout had heard nothing, but from the action of their horses which had pricked up their sharp ears it was evident that they at least had heard a sound.

"Your people are back yonder," said Dick. "I heard them a moment ago."

Joe said nothing.

"The nearer they come the briefer becomes your life," Dick went on.

There was a deadly coolness in his tones, and Joe's eye fell upon the cocked six-shooter which he seemed about to lift to his head.

"Didn't you hear a horse?" asked Dick.

"No."

"Of course you would lie for a purpose," was the retort.

Joe Bundy had not caught a single sound, and wondered how the ears of the bandit could be so much sharper than his own.

They were now in a little valley well filled with shadows, and the silence of death seemed to prevail! Far behind them was Tarus, with dead men in its streets, and a lot of rejoicing ranchers scattered about. Joe wondered if the victors thought of him, if they were not even then on his trail.

"Ah, if Red Hawk isn't at work, I'm mightily fooled," said the tall Yankee to himself. "I take a good deal of stock in that young Injun, and I've promised to give him a pull at the Bundy estate when I've shuffled off this mortal coil. The boys are rejoicing over their victory, but here I am in the grip of the prince of rascals, and on the road to death."

"Come, Joe; I don't hear them now, so we'll go on again," said Dolores Dick. "If they come up with us, there'll be a dead man on the ground, and they can plant you where they please."

The valley and its shadows were left behind, and once out on the open, Dolores Dick was about to give his steed the spur when a sound which both heard for a moment came over the plain.

"Somebody is coming," thought Joe. "I am in for it now if Dick thinks Red Hawk or Merle is behind us."

Dolores Dick had turned in his saddle and was watching.

"Are you ready, Joseph?"

Old Joe gave him a full look.

"Ready for what?"

"Death!"

"Am I to die here?"

"Yes. They are right over yonder, and, from what I know, have surrounded me, curse them! I shall have to fight for life where we are; but I don't intend to do it encumbered with you."

This was said with terrible firmness, and at

the end of the last word the hand of Dolores Dick fell upon the prisoner's arm.

"You bear them now. I can tell this by your face. You know that they have surrounded me—that they are closing in upon the raider of the border. You have said several times in my presence that you are the last of your line. I am going to exterminate the line here and now!"

The revolver was lifted to the old scout's temple. There was a brief silence, and then the report came.

There was a tumble, a cry and a startled horse, and Dolores Dick lay on the ground, still gripping his gun!

The person who rode up sprung from the saddle, and bent over the raider of the Southwest.

"Grazed!" he cried. "Good! Dolores Dick will stand before Merle and his court!"

"Bless me, Red Hawk, if you didn't touch that trigger in the nick of time!" exclaimed the last of the Bundys.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST RIDE.

YET that night the sky was lit up by the greatest conflagration ever seen in the region of the Tagus.

Hundreds of persons throughout the country climbed to the hill-tops and gazed across the darkened landscape and watched the shooting flames which told that the haunt of the bandits of the border was going up in fire and smoke.

Back from the fire rode a band of men headed by a boyish rider, in whose eyes gleamed a light of triumph. His nearest companion was a beautiful young girl, who ever and anon looked first at him and then at Mondragon, who rode on the other side of her steed.

Father and daughter had met again. The long separated had come together, and the old rancher, proud of his find, and with eyes swimming in tears, watched Inez.

The victory of the Mesquites had been complete. The few raiders who escaped were scattered and their power broken. They had fled from Tarus to seek shelter somewhere from the vengeance of the boy whose destruction they had planned, and were now saying that, with their leader lost, they would never re-form, but would seek other haunts and probably other ranches.

The ride back to Mesquite was not a weary one for the victors of the fight. The rising sun showered upon the little company his morning beams and found the whole lot within sight of the old ranch.

There sat, on one of the steeds, bound with his own scarlet sash, the man whose name had for years been the terror of the border.

Near him rode, likewise bound, the gray-bearded individual called Wizard Wool.

They were the only living prisoners of the avenging raid, and were going back to Mesquite for trial.

In a little while the company drew rein in front of the house, and Dolores Dick for the first time since his capture smiled.

A young girl had come out upon the porch and stood looking at the victors.

Instantly Wizard Wool, turning toward Merle, cried:

"That is the brand, and I am the man who can remove it!"

"Coward!" hissed Dolores Dick. "If I had known you were going to show such blood, you would not be here to cringe for life at the feet of Mustang Merle."

The boy rancher looked vengeancefully at the bandit, but did not speak.

Once more back in the room from which he had escaped after the duel with Lemon, Dolores Dick stood erect, with the countenance of an eagle, and calmly awaited his doom.

He heard every sound that came nigh the door and now and then glanced toward the sword-rack and smiled, as if recalling the fight on that very carpet.

There is in the Southwest and along the border an unwritten law which no man questions.

The beautiful land of the mesquite and the stately cactus has suffered long at the hand of the ruthless raider and the merciless bandit. The cattle-stealer and the midnight brander are the curses of the region, and man has taken into his own hands the right to punish the desperadoes.

Dolores Dick reviewed his life while he walked the floor of Mesquite Ranch and thought of the fate in store for him.

The feud existing between him and Merle was about to terminate. He had been Captain

Cussed's lieutenant; had been also his outlaw, and had commanded the bandits of Tarus, leading them to more than one rich prize; but now all this was at an end.

A sound at the door took his attention and he turned in that direction.

In a moment the portal opened and a queer figure came in on all fours. It was Jerome, the cripple of the ranch, and the moment he spied the bandit that moment he grinned.

Dolores Dick leaned forward and smiled at the youth.

"I don't see why they keep you here tied like a captive vulture," said Jerome.

"It is all wrong."

"What would you give to have your bonds cut?"

"I will make you the richest boy in this part of the world," was the reply.

"Where is the money to do that?"

"I will get it."

"A million?" grinned the cripple.

"More than that."

The deformed dreamer of Mesquite crept closer still and Dolores Dick saw something glitter in his hand.

The heart of the bandit stood still.

Jerome came closer and closer until he could reach up and feel the bandit's thongs. The knife touched Dick's wrists with a coldness that reminded him of the skin of a snake; it went to work and in a second the bonds parted.

He was free, but still in the house of his enemy!

Pushing past Jerome, he had nearly reached the door when a cry from his liberator startled him.

"Where is my million?" cried Jerome.

Dolores Dick did not heed the cry.

"You can't get out till I have it. Look! I have the drop on you now!"

The bandit of the border turned pale. He was looking down at the figure groveling on the floor, and saw that one of the bars is clutched a six-shooter.

Already his hand was on the door. There were deep shadows outside, and once among them he believed he would be safe.

Dolores Dick resolved to take the risk of a spring out.

He laughed at Jerome, threw open the door and sprang out.

At the same time the whole house resounded with a loud report, and the man who caught at one of the vine-covered columns of the veranda, missed it, and fell headlong on the grass beneath!

In another instant a dozen men were on the scene and some saw at the door the grinning face of the cripple of the ranch.

The last ride of the magnificent raider of the Southwest was at an end. The body was carried back into the house. The men of Mesquite would never get to pass the sentence of death upon Dolores Dick.

A day or two afterward Coral came into the room where her father lay, still suffering from the sword wound in the breast, and put down for his kiss her handsome cheek.

"Look before you kiss, papa," she said, smiling, and the detective looked with a strange stare.

"There is no brand," she went on. "Wizard Wool gave me the benefit of his secret, and the accused triangle has disappeared forever."

"And Wizard Wool?" asked Lemon.

"He is a prisoner no longer."

All this was true. The Wizard of Tarus City had removed the brand from Cora's cheek, and it was assuming its former beauty.

Tarus City was never rebuilt, but became the abode of the owl, the bat, and the coyote.

Further exploration of the Devil's Highway by Mustang Merle and his friends revealed the presence of a valuable mine, which, in time, enriched them all, and as they had no Dolores Dick to trouble them it was well worked, and pays to this day.

Coral did not leave the ranch which had given her shelter in the hour of need; neither did her father proceed on his trip to the gold region beyond the Tagus, but both remained with Mustang Merle, and the old ranch which had grown fairer, has as pretty a queen as one finds under the Stars and Stripes.

Old Joe Bundy is still the ruling spirit of the place, and every now and then he may be seen in close consultation with a young Indian who has the freedom of the ranch, and to whom its doors are never closed.

Red Hawk, the young Apache cyclone, is "worth his weight in gold."

THE END.

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